THE FLOWER OF ALOSHA
by Jang Ryang
1
illust BABSOT

OceanofPDF.com

Contents

Act 1.
Grand Duke Rhyner
Act 2.
The Forest of the Dead
Act 3.
The Arel Mansion

OceanofPDF.com

“You’re joking, right?” Kay laughed, nonplussed by the other’s absurd claim. Zigryl smiled back, his beautiful purple eyes arcing craftily. His arrogant grin made it hard to tell if he was indeed joking or not.

“You don’t think I brought you all the way to this cold place to crack jokes with you, do you?”

“So... you’re serious?”

This man was difficult to trust. Kay watched Zigryl with doubtful eyes, wondering. Zigryl simply shrugged.

“Well, I do suppose it’s a bit of a stretch to say it works on absolutely *everyone*. It hasn’t been tested on newborns, as far as I’m aware. But it was possible for an old woman far past menopause and a burly man whose only feminine trait was his neat nails. So I wouldn’t rule it out. There’s no need to render an infant pregnant, is there? That’s probably why they didn’t attempt it. Only pedophiles would want such a thing. Do you want it, Kay?”

Kay balked at the idea and shook his head.

He couldn’t figure out how Zigryl could say such chilling things with his pretty lips.

“Come to think of it, I remember hearing about a man who sexually molested a newborn next door and killed it in a village called Obria. The lunatic claimed the baby had been ‘too sexy to resist,’ and the judge was apparently uncertain whether to charge him with infanticide or rape. Not that the end result would have changed—he got a death sentence.”

“P-please stop talking about such things,” Kay said, pale in the face. Zigryl grinned playfully.

“Oh, don’t be such a buzzkill. What I’m trying to say is that the plant really does have the effect I told you about. It’s almost magical instead of medicinal. If you took it, it wouldn’t be so hard for you to become a mother yourself.”

“Why... would I want to be a mother?”

Kay rubbed down the goosebumps on his skin after picturing himself with a baby bump. Talking with this man left him inundated with fatigue, like a dense cloud cover during the rainy season. He was still young and believed himself to have amazing stamina thanks to all the exercise he got, but recently, he found himself tiring out very easily. Zigryl narrowed his eyes, probably unaware of Kay’s feelings, and scanned his flat belly.

“What? You don’t like the idea? I think it’ll suit you wonderfully. In my opinion, a bit of extra weight from pregnancy will make you look downright sexy.”

Did this constitute sexual harassment? Kay wished he could bury this man alive, but he had neither the rank nor the ability. He smiled wryly. “Well, I don’t know. I’m not inclined to agree,” he simply replied.

OceanofPDF.com

ACT 1.
Grand Duke Rhyner

Today was like any other day—at least it was until morning. The captain had made off somewhere, and Kay was correcting the postures of the newly recruited guards on a field whose sand was frozen stiff.

Wondering how these bastards had made the cut, he slapped their arms and said, “No, not like that. Like this, see? Put some strength into it. Left your joints at home? You couldn’t cut a fish if you’re so wobbly on your feet. Raise your arms higher, you hear me?”

Kay muttered lazily, rubbing the goosebumps on his arms. His ungloved hands and the ears visible under his cap were chapped by the chill. *Couldn’t they install some walls around here to keep out the wind? This was no different from a boot camp.* Kay’s black hair fluttered in the wind and slapped his cheek painfully. His breath hung white in the air and scattered.

He wanted to tell the guards to practice their postures a hundred times, leave them to themselves, and retire to the tent, but they were far from being able to practice on their own. This particular group of recruits seemed far weaker than most—that was a thought he had every time new ones were brought in. He was walking among them when someone ran toward him from outside the field. He saluted Kay crudely and asked, “Vice Captain, sir, is the captain inside?”

Kay had seen him a few times in the castle. Noticing that the man was sweating despite the cold, he said in his usual unimpressed tone, “You think?”

The man looked ready to cry at the lazy response.

“Do you know where he’s gone?”

“Of course not.”

Kay had no interest in the personal life of the captain. He was probably holed up in some bar nearby, but it wasn’t necessary to provide that information. The messenger’s face grew a little more pitiful, and Kay decided to be a little more generous.

“Why do you ask?”

The messenger, finally given a chance to speak, wiped the sweat off with a flush. Kay glanced behind him and said, “Why did you stop? Your sweat will freeze if you rest in this weather. Keep swinging.” Then he walked out of the formation, the messenger trailing him.

“Well, you see, the grand duke has arrived in the castle. The count has been looking for the captain...”

It was natural for Kay to be confused by this information.

“Grand duke? What grand duke? You mean Rhyner?”

Kay didn’t think this likely even as he said it. If that man was here, things couldn’t possibly be this quiet. His expectation was proved wrong, however, as the messenger nodded and replied, “Yes, Grand Duke Rhyner.”

“What! You mean that fox?” Kay found himself saying. He quickly looked around him, surprised by his own outburst. It was common for him to call the grand duke a fox, but now was not a proper time.

Nobody seemed to have noticed, so Kay looked back at the messenger, who grinned knowingly.

“Yes, Zigryl Rhyner. He apparently came without any warning. The count is panicking at the moment.”

That wasn’t surprising. If anything, this was a dire emergency. Kay could picture the chubby face of the count drained of all blood. What was the grand duke doing here in this countryside territory of Lablen? Not even Kay, the vice captain of the guards, had known about his coming. This was definitely not normal.

Zigryl Irier C. Rhyner was the only younger brother of the childless emperor. He was the next in line for the throne and would become the next ruler as soon as the sickly emperor passed. Naturally, given the emperor’s frail state, the grand duke was the most powerful man in the empire.

And he was known as a fox thanks to the extremely clever and effective tactics he used in the wars with the surrounding nations four years ago. He’d wrecked the enemy using the smallest possible number of men. Perhaps such a thing was hardly anything new in terms of military strategy, but his ways were so elaborate that the defeated nations began to indignantly refer to him as the Fox. This nickname had spread as a matter of course in the empire as well.

As rumor had it, he had a nasty, strange personality that his nickname could never do justice to. It was best to watch one’s mouth around him.

“But why is he here?” Kay asked quietly, furrowing his brow. What was the man doing here, and why had he come without announcing his visit?

“I don’t know. How could someone like me know that? But he’s come in person, so I suppose it must be something important. He only brought a single attendant—can you believe it?”

This visit wasn’t a surreptitious one, even if he’d only brought a minimal retinue. No call he made could be kept a secret. But only one attendant? Perhaps this risky and simple outing by the immediate successor really suggested an emergency. Kay realized he had no time to waste.

“Count Kroblen wanted to see the captain?”

He asked if this had to do with the duke, and the messenger nodded with a morose look on his face.

“You take the guards and search the nearby bars. He should be drinking in one of them.”

Praying that he wasn’t so drunk he couldn’t walk out on his own, Kay called for the training to stop.

* * *

Though it was no shocker, the captain was found in a remote pub, completely drunk and out of sorts.

“I wish I could drop him in a cask of liquor and bury him in the ground,” Kay muttered in all seriousness as he linked arms with the captain, who was wearing a ceremonial uniform. He was completely wasted and in no state to meet the count or the duke.

“Please hurry. We’ve kept them waiting for too long.”

Elvan, the secretary of the count, anxiously pressed Kay. If Kay had known this would happen, he would have given up on finding the captain in the first place and ironed his clothes instead. His uniform, which he’d never had a need for until now, was as wrinkled as an old rag.

“Oh, all right. Please bury that man out back for me, Elvan.”

Kay ran outside, trying to work out the creases in his pants.

“You can trust me to take care of it. Nobody will notice a thing,” Elvan said with a grin. Kay made his way into the castle, where he noticed a quiet stirring in the air. The grand duke really seemed to be here, from how

excited everyone seemed. Kay picked up his pace as the situation began to sink in.

Various people were sending him urgent signals. Though the castle was small and nondescript, he found it quite large now that he was in a hurry.

He stopped in front of the office, wiping his sweat and trying to catch his breath. A guard standing next to the door asked, “Vice Captain, where is the captain, sir? Did you come in his stead?”

Kay nodded, unable to speak because he was so out of breath. The guard nodded understandingly. “Of course. Please tell the count to replace the captain for once.”

I wish it were that easy. If the captain were dismissed, who would take his place? Kay wouldn’t take the captain’s position if it were offered to him on a silver platter.

“By the way, sir, you look terrible.”

Kay smiled bitterly in his shabby outfit and asked for the guard to open the door.

The door creaked open, and Kroblen, count and lord of the castle, called welcomingly. “Kay!” He sounded so desperate that Kay wondered for a moment if he should make an equal amount of fuss and throw his arms around the man’s arms.

Kay gave a salute.

“Apologies for the delay, my lord.”

“Come on in. The grand duke has been waiting for a while.”

Kay looked up at Kroblen’s cheerful tone and looked at the visitor. He sat in the count’s seat, leaning back arrogantly and crossing his legs. He was staring right at Kay.

Kay had expected the man to look sly and crafty because of his nickname, but he was surprised.

This man looked more like a lion than a fox, and he was younger than expected—perhaps in his mid- to late twenties. Kay had assumed the man would be quite old, since he’d been known as the grand duke for the longest time, but he appeared to be the same age as Kay. He wore a hat made from silver fox fur and a graceful fur coat, and had the impressive aura of a king. His golden hair peeked out beneath the hat, giving off a beautiful glint, and his dark purple eyes were as luxurious as velvet.

Though he had the face of a womanizer that had conquered many a woman, the confident look in his eyes made it clear that he was above all other men. Kay received the impression that he was standing before a relaxed lion, the king of the plains. In fact, the man made him feel scruffy in comparison.

The plump count seemed to be thinking the same thing, as he had a cowed look on his face. Kay could now understand why the count had been so happy to see him.

Kay found himself thinking that it was simply unfair for a man who had everything he wanted to be so handsome. If the grand duke became the emperor, he would be something the people could be proud of, at the very least—they would brag about his looks.

A smile filled his serene face, causing his eyes to narrow and replacing the imperiousness with a refreshing coolness. His elegant, peachy lips curved softly.

“I was going to berate you for being so late, but you’re strikingly beautiful.”

“…”

Kay wondered if he was sarcastically referring to his wrinkled clothes. Maybe people called him nasty because of such behavior. Since the man was so much higher in rank, Kay didn’t even feel the need to refute the statement. Having nothing to say, he simply bowed his head.

“I’m Kayle Logriel, the vice captain of the guards in Lablen. The captain is indisposed to the point of not being able to see you in person. Please forgive the fact that I have come in his stead.”

“That’s fine,” Zigryl said, shaking his head. Only when he stood up did Kay notice the man next to him. The duke had made such a powerful impression that this man seemed to pale in comparison. He looked to be around thirty years old—probably the one attendant that the grand duke had brought with him. His face looked quite dark, as though he were unhappy about something.

The duke approached Kay, who flinched and drew back. He was taller than expected, and Kay was slightly intimidated. Seeing Kay take half a step back, he smirked and held out his hand.

“Nice to meet you. You know my name already, I’m sure. Kayle Logriel, was it?”

Kay took the proffered hand.

“Uh, yes. You can just call me Kay.”

The duke smiled softly, saying, “Kay,” and smoothly shook Kay’s hand. Kay felt his skin being rubbed against a hard palm. The smile and the touch were as sweet as though the duke were trying to seduce a woman, and Kay found himself blushing. But perhaps it had just been a habit for the duke. He simply moved his hand away and smiled kindly again at Kay, who was rooted to the spot. A silly thought came to Kay—maybe the man acted seemingly graceful and dignified because he’d been raised as a member of the nobility. The count was also a noble, but this duke was on a completely different level.

“Your legs must be hurting. Sit down,” the grand duke commanded, as though this were his office. Kay sat down, puzzled. He’d noticed the count seemed a little taken aback at this. Why was the count standing, anyway?

Watching Kay’s puzzled expression, Grand Duke Rhyner took a spot right opposite him on the sofa. He leaned back arrogantly like he was interrogating Kay, crossing his legs and placing his fingers, meshed together, on his knee.

“Do you find the work here rewarding?”

The question was completely random.

“I beg your pardon?” Kay asked. The duke smiled, as if the question was nothing serious.

“Has it not been difficult keeping order recently?”

How did the difficulty of his work have anything to do with how rewarding he found it? Kay tried his best to smile instead of scowl at the strange flow of conversation.

“There’s nothing out of the ordinary here. This place is surrounded by forests and mountains all around. There are few invaders, and the peace is maintained quite well internally as well.”

“So things aren’t too bad, huh?”

The duke slowly unclasped his hands and got up, looking appreciative of the work Kay was doing. Then there was a flash of metal. In the blink of an eye, his sharp sword was held at the chubby neck of the count, near an artery. He had been so swift, Kay hadn’t even noticed him drawing his sword. He didn’t look discomfited in the least as he made his intent to kill clear, and it took Kay a considerable while for him to realize that he wasn’t

just seeing things. Only after the count groaned quietly did he come to the realization.

“Wh-what are you doing?” Kay said, shooting to his feet and fumbling for his sword at his waist. The duke grinned.

“Listen to me, Kay. I’ve sent a total of fifty private soldiers to Lablen since last month—to Edor, one of its sub-regions, to be exact. But none of those fifty have returned.”

His tone was so calm, Kay couldn’t believe he had a sword to the count’s throat. He shrugged, however, pushing the blade a little closer, and a tiny dribble of blood traveled down from under the count’s chin. Kay realized that he could accomplish nothing by drawing his sword. Hesitating, he put his hands in the air.

“W-wait! Wait. Fifty soldiers?”

“Yes.”

“Wh-what does th-that have to do with us? Do you mean to say we hid those fifty soldiers?” Kay shouted. The count screamed, his pale face quivering. Apparently, the duke had edged his blade even closer.

“I don’t know. I guess you could say that.”

“Wh-why would we do such a thing? Your Grace, please withdraw your weapon...”

Kay’s head spun at this unforeseen development. What would happen if the duke killed Kroblen? Kay smiled awkwardly, trying to soothe the duke. “Why would we do such a thing?” he asked again, but it wasn’t having the intended effect.

“Indeed. Why *did* you do it?”

“What do you mean by that? You can’t just threaten people like this because you’re the grand duke!”

“Actually, I can.”

This was hardly likely, but the duke gave a relaxed smile after his arrogant response.

A flummoxed Kay threw a desperate look at the duke’s attendant, who sat in the back with an irritated look on his face. He shouted, “Please stop His Grace! We really did nothing of the sort!”

Fifty private soldiers? Kay had never heard or seen any of them. Surely he would have noticed if such a large number had entered the castle. The attendant looked into Kay’s eyes, then gave a scathing look at his liege.

“Your Grace? I really don’t think he knows anything. Why don’t we talk it out instead of threatening them like rogues?”

“Why not? Does it look bad?” the duke asked, a shy smile on his face—Kay was certain that it was a shy smile. He opened his mouth to respond, but he couldn’t find the words. Of course this wasn’t pleasant to look at. But if he was honest about it, he couldn’t be sure how that man would react. Seeing Kay gaping and unable to speak, the duke shrugged.

“Well, all right. Kay, you really know nothing about this?”

Kay nodded effusively.

“Hmm.” The duke looked him over with narrowed eyes, then sheathed his sword with the sliding of sharp metal. The trembling Kroblen gasped and fell to the floor as soon as the sword was taken away, and Kay rushed over to support him. He could feel just how terrified this cowardly man had been by the way his skin quivered. The man responsible for reducing the count to a quivering mess looked down at them with graceful, haughty eyes.

“How can you not know? What were you so busy with that you didn’t notice?”

The duke was asking if Kay had been negligent of his duties. Kay clammed up.

* * *

The duke sipped tea from a white ceramic cup.

“So you mean to say that though Edor is in Lablen’s jurisdiction, it is all but an independent entity?”

How could the man be so relaxed after holding a sword at a man’s neck just moments ago? He was as brazen as they came. Kay studied the duke’s face as he savored his tea, then nodded.

Edor was a village in the Lablen territory, but it was far too small and could only be reached via a route that passed through a dangerous region known as the Forest of the Dead. There were almost no dealings with the village, except on special occasions.

“It does belong in our territory, but we seldom ever touch it. We provide support when a famine or plague strikes, but that’s about it.”

“So you know nothing about what goes on over there?”

“Well, we have requested that they report to us when something noteworthy happens... but the forest that falls in between is a very dangerous region.”

It was such a dark and monster-infested place that it wasn’t conducive to human messengers or things like carrier pigeons. Though the duke did sound like he was interrogating them, there was nothing they could have done.

There was no knowing where these fifty people had gone, but it was a matter of no importance to Kay. Outsiders believed that one had to pass through Lablen to get to Edor, but there was not much of an actual connection between the two regions. It wasn’t clear, however, if the duke would be understanding of this. Kay tried his best not to frown at this man who was demanding repayment for something they’d never borrowed. He wished he could head outside for a smoke.

“But why would you send men to Edor?” asked Elvan, the secretary who’d come in the count’s place after he had been carried out unconscious. Kay listened closely, silently repeating the curses he’d already directed at the captain for the hundredth time. He’d been wondering about this as well.

No matter how much he tried to figure it out, he couldn’t see why the grand duke had sent men to Edor in the first place. Though the place was a natural fortress of sorts, since it was surrounded by mountains, there was a sheer cliff behind it and to the front of it was a vast forest where many strange things happened. Soldiers stationed here would starve after their supplies were cut off if the village was turned into some military outpost. This was obvious from the fact that the village had no contact with the outside world even now. Even the soil there was barren and unusable. What interest could the duke have in the village?

The duke put down his teacup quietly and laughed.

“I need something from the village... a special produce, you could say.”

“Oh... a special... produce?”

Kay had lived in Lablen for ten years, but he’d never heard of anything of the sort. Elvan, who’d lived all his life in Lablen, seemed equally puzzled. He nudged his glasses up and asked, “I’m not sure I know what you mean.”

The region was barren, and any sort of food produced there—be it potatoes or otherwise—would be devoured in a heartbeat. Elvan was

looking askance at the duke, but he didn’t even glance at the secretary as he said, “It’s not very well known since it’s so rare. I’d rather not explain at the moment—not like this. But it’s very precious, I’ll say that much.”

The man reiterated the scarceness and extreme value of this object multiple times. *I suppose it must be. He sent fifty soldiers, after all.* Kay scratched his chin as the duke exclaimed like a child, “It’s expensive as shit!” There was an odd look on the man’s face after he was done. Kay nodded heavily, not wanting to seem as though he wanted whatever the duke was after, and said, “Yes. I see.”

He then picked up his teacup. The duke watched Kay, tapping the edge of his cup with his fingernail and going silent for a moment.

“This is extremely confidential information,” he said, smiling as if he were doing Kay a favor.

“But Kay, if you want to know, I can make an exception and tell you more.”

“I beg your pardon?” Kay said with a frown. He had no idea what this man was after. Reminding himself he couldn’t fall for the duke’s friendly smile, he narrowed his eyes guardedly. That same smile had been on his face as he held a blade to the count’s throat. Kay wondered if he should say he was curious, or be honest and tell him that he wasn’t interested. The duke looked as though he wanted the former, but maybe his real intention was simply to kill Kay for failing to know his place.

What the hell am I supposed to do?

Kay was doing his best to see through this man’s confusing behavior when the attendant standing behind the duke, Schumann, spoke in his usual gruff tone.

“Your Grace. You seem to be forgetting something. While you’re squandering your time like this, the sickly emperor in the capital could pass away at any moment. I’d like you to remind yourself of that often. That will mean your plans will all be forfeit, and you’ll be dragged back to stick your head under the crown.”

“Can you be any more unpleasant, Schumann?”

The duke stared at the attendant, who was being disdainful and irritable toward his liege, his smiling eyes cold as ice. The purple eyes looked shockingly sharp in their current state, though Schumann himself didn’t seem to mind much. Kay, who’d been watching from the side, found

himself sinking deeper into his sofa and averting his gaze. Elvan, who didn't know how to sense another person's energy, was simply a little confused by the mood. Kay, on the other hand, was sensitive to displays of hostile energy and found the grand duke's look extremely disconcerting. He wanted to avoid meeting it if he could. It was extremely uncomfortable to sit with such an unpredictable man.

"But you're also right. We should talk about work. All right. Kay?"

Kay looked up from his teacup. He had the impression that his name was being called much too often, and the tone of the duke's voice was extremely sweet, but he didn't ask why the duke kept on saying his name.

"Are you busy these days?"

How was it that Kay couldn't predict a single thing this man said? He was asking if Kay was busy. This meant the man had a request for him if he wasn't busy. The duke was staring at his face now, demanding an answer. *Well, shouldn't you tell me what you want from me first?*

"I beg your pardon?" he asked, trying to figure out the intent behind the question.

The duke simply repeated his question instead of explaining further.

"Kay. Are you busy?"

Kay was reminded of Sarah, a waitress at a bar that he sometimes met, and the way she'd ask, *You busy these days, honey?* He cocked his head.

"I don't know... Not really..."

There wasn't anything to keep him all that busy.

"That's good," the duke muttered at Kay's wavering answer.

"I'd like your help."

"With what?"

Kay had expected this, but he felt his eyes twitch slightly, nevertheless. He had an ominous feeling about this. He also noticed that Elvan seemed to find the situation uncomfortable. No doubt it was odd that the duke was only speaking to Kay when Elvan had come in the count's place. Kay wasn't feeling so comfortable himself, of course, but if the request was for him, he had no reason to refuse. He fixed his gaze on the handsome man's eyes, wondering what he would ask.

The duke shrugged, leaning back arrogantly in his chair. Then he said lazily, "What do you think it is? I told you I'm looking for something

produced in Edor. I need to look into what happened to my fifty soldiers if there is time to spare, but the object comes first.”

He then muttered that he was so extremely busy. Kay wasn’t sure how to answer. Why did the man talk the way he did?

“Uh... How would you like me to help you?”

Did he want Kay to find the location of this special produce? Was Kay to be his guide through the forest? Did he want soldiers? Kay thought about the things he might want.

Though the duke was saying he wanted help, this was basically an order that Kay had no choice but to obey. There was probably no one in the empire who could refuse the request of someone who would become—was almost sure to become—the next emperor.

The duke gave a deep smile at the question. When he smiled like that, his eyes slightly resembled those of a fox.

“How, you say... Well, it might be a bit taxing on your body. I hope you’re okay with that.”

* * *

Schumann ignored the foxy grin on the face of the grand duke—Zigryl—and raised his teacup. His purple eyes were glistening with a wicked enjoyment.

“He’s so cute. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“...”

Zigryl didn’t seem to care that Schumann wasn’t responding.

“So very cute...” he muttered, thinking of the frowning and confused Kay that had been sitting right in front of him just moments ago. Kay had kept tidying his uniform, as if embarrassed at how wrinkled it was. He was Zigryl’s type, and his reactions to the slight flirting had evoked a baffled response that was sexier than Zigryl could have ever imagined. It was obvious that the small head was working overtime whenever Zigryl made an ambiguous comment, and he found that extremely enticing. Even while thinking that Zigryl’s sexual harassment was a joke, he had shown an instinctive wariness that had impressed Zigryl very much.

Zigryl narrowed his eyes and moistened his lips.

“If I didn’t have to return to the capital so quickly, I’d have loved to stay with him for a while and have some fun,” he muttered.

He laughed wickedly, feeling a mixture of disappointment and pleasure. He hadn’t expected to find such a charming young man in the countryside. The dark hair would no doubt stick to the skin like seaweed when drenched with sweat, and the yellow eyes exude seductiveness, even when he was doing nothing in particular. Zigryl’s hands would probably leave marks on the man’s fair skin if he were to grab it. How would it feel to force his penis in between those red lips?

Zigryl tapped the armrest of his chair with his fingernails and muttered, “I wonder if he has a lover?”

“Oof. Do you care about such things, Your Grace?” Schumann asked, pretending to be surprised. Zigryl snickered.

“Well, if he is so much in love that he denies me sex, I would be very lonely.”

Most men would have corrected Zigryl, saying it wasn’t customary for men to have sex with each other. But Schumann didn’t bother.

“Even if you say that, you won’t let it stop you from sleeping with him.”

Zigryl shrugged and laughed, not saying anything in response. Schumann had known this man for twenty years now. The words, *Well, yes*, didn’t have to be said out loud. Zigryl would not be interested in whether the other person gave consent. He would try to ask for it first, of course, but if that failed, he was a blackguard who would use any means available to him—be it drugs or blackmail. Zigryl Irier C. Rhyner was such a man.

“Don’t treat me like a criminal, now. It’s no big deal, is it? I just want to test him out in bed, that’s all. He won’t be any the worse for wear.”

Schumann found himself sighing at the grinning Zigryl, even though this sort of behavior was hardly surprising.

“The things I feel are natural urges that can be found in any human being.”

He spoke like a heinous criminal with his pretty face, and the sight was enough to make anyone scowl. Schumann himself wasn’t too conscientious a person, but this was too much.

“You know, I happen to think I did my best to raise you well.”

What had happened to this man? Zigryl had no morals to speak of, even though Schumann hadn’t taught him debauchery. To call this man a fox was

a severe undervaluation of what this man was capable of, and far too innocent.

Schumann gave him a displeased look, and Zigryl laughed, his eyes slits.

“You’re no fun.”

“You lack a basic sense of morality, Your Grace.”

Zigryl didn’t bother denying it or seem offended at Schumann’s continued rudeness. Zigryl never bothered to keep Schumann in check as long as no one was watching. They’d grown up together since a very young age, and to Zigryl, Schumann was both a teacher and a friend. This didn’t mean, however, that Zigryl would hesitate to cut off the man’s tongue should he disrespect Zigryl in front of others.

If the displeasure he felt was greater than the inconvenience of a Schumann who couldn’t speak, Zigryl could do so at any moment. Schumann was smart enough to know Zigryl’s limits and avoided being impolite when other people were watching. There were moments, however, when he couldn’t help himself—just like earlier.

“I’ll bet he looks delectable when he cries,” Zigryl muttered. Schumann began to pity Kay. As Zigryl had said, a night with him wouldn’t leave him the worse for wear, but it wouldn’t be too pleasant an experience for a normal young man.

“I doubt you have time to waste,” Schumann said, intending to remind him that they were in a hurry. Zigryl didn’t seem willing to change his mind, however.

“I’m just having a little fun while I can. We can’t leave for Edor today anyway, can we? Enough meddling,” he said, waving his hand away dismissively. Schumann tutted, shaking his head. This was none of his business, after all.

Schumann, though slightly better than Zigryl, still lacked conscience and easily did away with any guilt that he felt. Then he changed the subject.

“That aside... do you really think an Alosha’s Flower is really in Edor? Even if they’re mainly found in cold regions, I’m not liking what we’ve seen so far. Edor seems to have next to no contact with the outside world.”

Schumann explained that he wouldn’t have bothered to check if the information hadn’t been from Hugh. There was no way to explain how the fifty soldiers had vanished, either. They hadn’t been sent all at once, but in

groups of ten, of course. But still, that was too large a number to vanish merely because of bad luck. There had been enough men to form an entire squadron. Fifty was probably enough for a hostile takeover of Edor, even. Kay had explained that smaller groups could have gone missing in the forest, since the terrain was so harsh and the forest dark. People often disappeared in the forest. This only made Schumann more doubtful. If the place was surrounded by a wood that had swallowed up fifty men, it would be next to impossible for information to leak out of there in the first place.

Zigryl also looked doubtful upon hearing Schumann's words. He'd also had plenty of questions.

"Well, I don't know. Why would it be necessary to lure me in by such complicated means?"

People would not take risks to try to kill Zigryl, since the very thing he was trying to do was avoid having to succeed the emperor. Zigryl had no desire for power, and he knew that it was more pleasant in more than one way to stay a grand duke rather than become emperor. An emperor was forced to uphold a heavy crown. In return for his freedom, he would receive an excessive amount of work and duties. Zigryl saw nothing in it for him, since he had everything he could want as a grand duke. Anyone could take the throne, as far as he was concerned. As an emperor, he would have to bring an entire retinue with him even on the briefest of trips, and he didn't fancy that.

The other nobles were somewhat aware of this fact. Zigryl had brains and charisma, and suited the throne quite well. But he was a troublemaker at heart, fickle and nasty. He stopped at nothing to get what he wanted, and not even his allies appreciated his tactics, much less his enemies. What member of the nobility would want a crafty fox on the throne when what they really needed was a puppet to control to their liking?

The problem was that the imperial family had a scarcity of children, and Zigryl was the only available successor. The current emperor had fallen ill without ever having had a child, throwing the entire empire into a state of emergency. Though nobody wanted it, the crown would automatically fall to Zigryl should the emperor give up the ghost.

In the current situation, finding a new potential successor took precedence over attempting to assassinate Zigryl. That was why Zigryl had come out this far.

Schumann nodded at his words.

“Well, you’re right. Even if we don’t like it, there’s probably little to no risk. The count tells me that there is a certain Baron Arel who has the most influence in the village. I believe we can request cooperation from him. It’s a small village. A search ought to turn up something rather quickly.”

What Schumann intended was closer to exploitation than a “request” for cooperation, but he arrogantly believed that the countryside baron would think it an honor to serve a grand duke. In truth, he was no better than a bandit by the roadside.

“I’ll leave you to handle such details,” Zigryl said, closing his eyes lazily. He didn’t want to think about anything else. What mattered was how long the emperor would stay alive, and whether an Alosha’s Flower was really in Edor. As someone who’d never attempted anything so uncertain, he found the current situation very annoying and unpleasant.

“I’ll be pissed if he kicks the bucket before I find an Alosha’s Flower.”

“You don’t have to put it that way... I’m always doing my best,” Schumann said, his teeth chattering and his face pale. Nothing could be more terrible than for something to go wrong, forcing him to put up with Zigryl’s temper. The man would pester him to no end, and the thought of it gave him chills. If Zigryl was forced to become an emperor, Schumann could very well be doomed to a lifetime of being hounded. In fact, he might even be forced to try and assassinate Zigryl, only to be killed off in the process.

Unlike what most vassals would do in his situation, Schumann was determined to do his very best to dissuade his liege from taking the throne. If that failed, he would abandon everything to the wind and hole himself up on some remote mountain so that he could live the rest of his life in peace.

Zigryl glanced at the blanched face of Schumann as though reading his mind. He narrowed his eyes, then gave a slow, intense smile. It reminded Schumann of a hungry snake that had just discovered a frog hiding in the grass. Schumann froze, then gave him a sickened look.

“I will find it no matter what, before His Majesty passes away. So please stop looking at me like that,” he grumbled.

Zigryl had closed his eyes again. He nodded carelessly and said, “Yes, yes. You’d better. That crown is a hideous thing. It’d be embarrassing to wear it.”

“Oh... yes.”

Sure it is. Schumann slowly turned away, no longer wanting to listen. Zigryl stopped him as he was about to leave.

“Schumann? I feel cold.”

“Shall I tell them to have the room heated?”

The countryside was a cold place, though Schumann didn’t think the room was particularly chilly. Zigryl seemed to dwell on his thoughts for a moment, then shook his head.

“No. Tell Kay to come to me in the evening.”

That young man probably had a high body temperature and a warm body.

Schumann shrugged, a pitying look on his face as he nodded and left the room.

* * *

The sky had been cloudy today. By the time Kay left the duke’s room, snow was falling. He stared blankly up at the snowflakes. By the time they hit the ground and he looked up again, he noticed that the streets were already covered with a blanket of white.

“But it’s... only early September. Even if this region is located to the north, this is just too much,” Kay muttered, disquieted. He had been born in the south. It had been ten years since he’d started living in Lablen, but he simply couldn’t seem to get used to the weather. Down under, September was a month when people had trouble falling asleep in the tropical night.

Elvan laughed as if Kay had stated the obvious.

“That’s why it’s snowing.”

Elvan explained that this was quite late as far as snow went. Kay shrugged at him. He was right. Kay had been shocked when it snowed in July last year. It was cold, and therefore it was natural for snow to fall. But the dates were what had him feeling something was off-kilter.

“At this rate, we’ll be walking sole deep in snow by morning. Not great weather to be leaving the castle in,” Elvan said, tapping the windowsills. Kay had just been thinking the same thing, and looked put out.

“Well, it might be a bit taxing on your body. I hope you’re okay with that.”

Kay hadn’t been okay with it at all when the duke had said this, but he’d nodded without thinking. What did a mere soldier’s opinion matter when the grand duke wanted to get something done? The duke had smiled like a fox and leaned deep into his sofa. His slim chin had been buried in the soft-looking silver fox fur.

“I’m sure you heard my rude attendant here earlier, but we’re in a bit of a hurry. I hardly have enough time to spend chatting with you, Kay.”

“...”

“But don’t be too disappointed. I’m sure I can spare a few minutes if I tried.”

Kay smiled awkwardly as the duke smiled innocently with his eyes. An image of a depraved old nobleman harassing a young virgin lady came to his mind, but he did his best to ignore it. He was no maiden, but a soldier, and this man had a bright grin on his face that seemed to be a far cry from any sort of harassment.

Noticing Kay’s effort to smile, the duke’s grin had become even sweeter.

“I’ll need a guide to accompany me to Edor. Be ready to depart first thing tomorrow morning.”

Elvan gave a short groan beside Kay, and Kay was also forced to withdraw his smile. There would not be enough time to ready a party large enough to accompany the duke by tomorrow morning, even if he rushed out of the room this instant. Everyone would have to ready their disused uniforms and sharpen their rusty weaponry if they were to pass themselves off as proper private soldiers.

“Tomorrow, my lord? Well, then, we’ll need quite a few men...”

Kay said nervously, wishing he could be granted a little more time, if any. The duke waved his hand in the air.

“Men? As I’m sure you know, I only need you to come along.”

“I beg your pardon? But that’s...”

Kay’s eyes widened, not at all following this conversation.

The duke cocked his head, puzzled. Though he was a grown man, it didn’t look at all strange to exhibit such behavior.

“It’ll be just you and me tomorrow,” he declared. Kay blanched, and the man behind the duke scowled.

“Your Grace? Please,” Schumann said quietly. The duke sighed deeply and laughed like an actor in a comedic play.

“...is what I’d like, but Schumann will come along as well. So it’ll be the three of us. He’s a bit like a fussy mother-in-law, but I’m sure you’ll understand, Kay.”

The duke complained, saying Schumann always liked to meddle, and Schumann looked at him. Kay wiped the sweat off his palms. *My god.* Did the man really mean it?

“S-so you mean to say... I’m the only one who’s to accompany you?”

“Yes. I thought you weren’t busy?”

Whether he was busy wasn’t what mattered here. Kay had never accompanied such a high-ranked noble before. The most he’d ever done was take the count’s only daughter to the five-day market that opened inside the castle. And he was now to join the duke, of all people? It wasn’t even the captain who was being asked to do this. Why would he, a mere vice captain, do such a thing?

It was impossible to imagine the three of them traveling together without a retinue. He was obviously the lowest in rank among the three. Why did he have to put up with such a headache? The duke was no ordinary noble, and obviously as touchy as they came.

“Well, in order to ensure you have a more comfortable time, I think... we’ll need more people to come with us, my lord,” Kay stammered.

“Ah, you’re worried for me?” the duke said, grinning. This was nothing as affectionate as worry. Frankly, Kay did not care if the duke slept on the floor or fed on foraged plants. Not wanting a trip with only him and his attendant, however, he was forced to nod. This seemed to be his only option.

“Obviously, I won’t be able to serve you properly by myself. Even if the distance isn’t that great, we’ll have to make camp outdoors for at least one night.”

“Yes, I suppose,” the duke said, nodding. Kay saw a glimpse of hope. Keeping his brow from furrowing and trying to smile, he began, *“I will ready a party to the best of my ability. This will ensure you have everything you need during the trip—”*

The duke lazily bade him stop.

“Not necessary.”

“I’m sorry?”

“You might not be nearly enough, but you’re enough for me.”

Kay couldn’t bring himself to tell the duke that *he* wasn’t fine with this.

“…”

“I’m not that picky. I’m sure you’ll be able to satisfy me if you try.”

The duke’s purple eyes glittered playfully, arcing like those of a fox’s. At the same time, Kay had a feeling a hard road lay ahead of him.

“Y-Your Grace.”

“It’s fine. Don’t worry about me. Aren’t you a kind soul?” he said, smiling contentedly and waving his hand in the air. Kay scowled, his face pale.

“Now, Kay. Go and get ready.”

The duke sent him away, making it clear he wasn’t taking no for an answer.

* * *

The Forest of the Dead was located in the northernmost reaches of the empire. There were no records describing when the region had been given such an unfortunate name. People simply guessed that it had had the name long before the empire had even been established.

On the outside, it looked like an ordinary woods—peaceful, quiet, with not many dangerous monsters and relatively easy paths. There seemed to be nothing to set it apart from the many other forests to be found in the empire. In terms of the visible dangers, Lorelai Forest to the northwest and Cambrian Forest in the central region had many more monsters, making them more of a threat. These forests were said to house hordes of gargoyles. In comparison to these, the Forest of the Dead seemed to be menacing in nothing but name.

There was one peculiarity about this forest, however—despite the fact that the paths that ran through it weren’t all that dangerous, people often went missing inside it. Not counting those killed by animals or monsters, there were many who’d simply disappeared in the forest—one out of every ten who ventured in never came back out. Because so few ever went inside, only two or three people vanished every year, but this was a large number proportion-wise. The other oddity was that those who went missing in this

way never turned up as dead bodies. According to one renowned magician, there was no place in the entire world that was so full of evil energy. But whether to actually believe this claim was up to the listener, of course.

Edor was located smack in the heart of this forest, being a relatively unknown village consisting of only about twenty families. Baron Arel, the only noble in the village, would send someone once every two months to purchase salt and other necessities.

“Come to think of it...”

It suddenly struck Kay that a messenger from the House of Arel should have arrived last month. The delay was far too long to be dismissed as unimportant. Had something happened? Even if the messenger had disappeared in the forest, it had been long enough for the village to have sent out another.

“Hey, Leon. No one has come from the House of Arel yet, right?”

Kay put down the documents he’d been holding and turned to Leon, who was packing beside him. Leon looked up as he rolled up a sleeping bag.

“Arel? You mean Baron Arel?”

Kay didn’t recall there being any other barons in the vicinity. He nodded, and a stupid look appeared on Leon’s face.

“Oh, you’re right. I guess they’re pretty late this time. It’s about time someone showed up,” he muttered nonchalantly. Then he began to tie the sleeping bag.

“Why isn’t anyone here yet? Do you think there was an accident? Even if there were, they’d have sent someone else by now,” Kay muttered.

“I’m sorry?” Leon said, his eyes widening. He tilted his head, perhaps finding it odd that Kay, who’d never taken an interest in Baron Arel so far, was suddenly asking all these questions.

“Well, I suppose they don’t need more supplies yet? I’m sure someone will come when they run out.”

He seemed to find the question silly. Kay, who’d been quite grave, suddenly felt embarrassed and leaned forward into a document.

“I guess you’re right...” he muttered.

He was in a bad mood, and everything upset him.

Leon was right. Someone would come when it was needed. Perhaps they’d bought more supplies than usual last time. There couldn’t be

anything noteworthy going on, and even if there were, it was nothing for Kay to worry about.

Apparently, the thought of crossing that ominous forest with people that made him uncomfortable weighed heavily on his mind. No soldier should be complaining about a difficult trip that would only last several days, but he couldn't seem to stop himself from wondering why it had to be him.

He could see that the streets were blanketed with snow already. The night hadn't deepened much, but the snow was piling up. If it continued to snow at this rate, they would have to walk through ankle-deep snow instead of a layer that only covered their soles. Nothing seemed to be going right.

"By the way, Vice Captain. The captain was gnashing his teeth when he woke up. I'd advise you to stay out of his sight until you leave," Leon said, shaking the sleeping bag to check that he'd tied it properly. *Huh?*

"The captain's angry at me? Why?"

Leon furrowed his brow and laughed.

"Well... you know that the captain's been after that one lady... Anna, right?"

Kay knew. The man had been singing her praises for several months now. How could he not? But as suggested by Leon's hesitation, Kay was aware that the two were not actually courting. The captain's love was not quite requited. He'd made such a fuss over her, there was probably no one in Lablen who didn't know that the captain fancied her.

From the way he'd refused to spend a sober moment for the last few days, it seemed that the woman had rejected him in the end. *But what of it?*

Kay frowned, having a bad feeling about what was coming.

"Don't tell me..."

Leon shrugged and laughed.

"That lady apparently told the captain yesterday that you are the only one for her. She can't seem to forget you, and she can't be interested in any other man... Or so I'm told."

"..."

Why was it that none of his forebodings ever turned out to be wrong?

"Were you two ever a thing?" Leon asked.

"Well... I guess you could say we were... briefly."

It had hardly been anything serious, since all Kay had done was sleep with her a few times. Leon fixed a quiet stare on him, and Kay continued

lamely, “We weren’t all that close. I-I think Anna was seeing someone back then. I know for certain that someone was wooing her at the time...”

Kay frowned, murmuring that Anna had seemed to like that man. She’d asked Kay if she should let him court her, since he seemed like a good man. Kay had nodded to her, of course, with a laugh.

Leon stared at the floor. “Oh, Vice Captain, sometimes I think you know women well, but at other times, you’re a complete dud. Are you sure she wasn’t just joking?” he muttered.

“Why would she have joked about that?” Kay asked.

“I don’t know. You know women are hard to understand.”

Kay tried to remember what he could—he hadn’t really cared if Anna had loved him or that other man who’d pursued her.

“Did you actually see the man this Anna was presumably seeing?”

“No... But I’m pretty sure there must have been someone.”

She was quite a nice woman. From Kay’s point of view, she would be wasted on a man like the captain.

His thoughts grew convoluted at the thought of his superior. In truth, he didn’t need to feel sorry because the woman the captain had been after had preferred him. Kay had slept with her long before the captain had ever known her, and only briefly at that. *But then again...*

A hand to his temple, he pushed the documents aside.

“This is the probably the fifth, right?”

“No... the fourth.”

There had been Elizabeth, Sylvie, and Jane before Anna. Since the same situation had been repeated four times already, of course, he felt sorry even though he’d technically done nothing wrong. He could understand the captain’s resentment.

“Gosh. Do you mean to sleep with every woman in these parts?”

Leon berated, laughing. Kay rested his face on his desk. He muttered that it was the captain who was strangely going after all the women that he’d slept with, but Leon scoffed.

Feeling frustrated, Kay picked up a cigarette and got up. After the separation with Jane last year, the captain had pulled his sword on Kay. Kay could still remember that quivering blue blade. The captain could be out to kill him for sure this time. Though he might seem like an alcoholic, he was

fantastic with the sword. One wrong move, and Kay could be headed to the afterlife before the pain even registered.

Who knew that he'd suddenly grow to welcome the trip to Edor tomorrow? Perhaps it was really a blessing in disguise.

Kay was about to head out for a smoke when someone knocked on the door. He gasped, wondering if it was the captain, but he realized the man wouldn't knock like a sober person. He hid himself behind the door anyway before he opened the door.

"Pardon the intrusion," said Schumann, the duke's secretary and attendant. This stiff-looking man spotted Kay behind the door and grinned just like his liege—only this man's smile seemed a little more nasty.

"C-can I help you?" Kay asked reluctantly.

"Looks like you're ready for tomorrow. Have you already eaten?"

The question was random, just like his master's.

"I'm sorry? Dinner? No, I haven't," Kay replied.

"Grand Duke Rhyner has instructed me to ask you if you would like to join him for dinner. It's great news that you haven't eaten yet."

"Me?" Kay said with a wry smile. Schumann stepped aside as if that was his answer to the awkward grin.

"You should hurry. If you keep him waiting for too long, there's no knowing what he might do—he's hungry in more ways than one."

"Haha..."

Perhaps this man didn't like the man he served very much. Thinking Schumann's joke excessive, he laughed awkwardly.

Schumann gave Kay a pitying look that puzzled him, then guided him to the duke's room.

* * *

Schumann threw a sidelong glance at Kay, who was walking beside him. Zigryl's eye for beauty wasn't quite typical, and Schumann couldn't agree with the duke's statement that Kay was "strikingly beautiful." But the man certainly looked neat. He had a shapely nose and fair skin, making him look less like a mercenary and more like a soldier of the imperial forces from a privileged background. His appearance had further improved because he'd taken off the ugly uniform from earlier.

He had just enough muscles to keep him from seeming sluggish, and they showed through the clean clothes. This was a perfectly manly individual. From what Schumann had secretly overheard just now outside the door, he had no lack of women, either.

Schumann tutted, recalling the information he'd gained by eavesdropping like a rat outside the door. He wasn't a stickler for the dignity of the nobility. Kay looked around at him. Schumann grinned casually, and Kay returned an awkward smile.

"You look much nicer out of uniform," Schumann said.

Kay bowed his head in embarrassment, laughing.

"I had no time to prepare my uniform earlier..."

If this young man repeated the gesture in front of the duke, exposing the skin of his neck, he would basically be offering himself on a silver platter. And even if he didn't, it was already too late for him, anyway.

"Uh, why did the Grand Duke Rhyner invite me to dinner?"

"..."

Schumann bit back a groan at the innocence of the question. He couldn't tell the man that His Grace probably wanted to rape him—technically, the act was not difficult, but he didn't want Kay running away—so he smiled casually.

"Well... I suppose he wants to get to know you better since you'll be traveling together for some time starting tomorrow."

"Get to... know me?"

This wasn't entirely wrong. What better way to "get to know" one another than to sleep together? That would do much more than mere words or a shared meal.

But Kay cleared his throat. It was unclear what he thought of the idea.

"To think he would be so considerate of a commoner like me! He's a kind-hearted person, to be sure."

To think I'd live to see him be called kind-hearted... Schumann thought, but he didn't show it.

Kay had probably been working from a young age and assumed that a flattering comment was in order at this juncture. He had no idea what the "kind-hearted man" would do to his body a little while from now.

"You don't have to say things like that. His Grace doesn't care about the status of a person—be they a noble or a peasant."

Schumann was referring to the way Zigryl forced himself on any man he took a fancy to, regardless of their status, and Kay nodded. He seemed a little impressed. Schumann's words did make the duke seem like a just young nobleman who was fair to everyone he met, though this description couldn't be farther from the truth.

Having delivered an edited comment intended to create this misunderstanding, Schumann was just trying to distance himself from this affair. The sympathy he felt for Kay was an entirely different matter. Both the liege and the vassal were identical in their depravity—the only difference being that one of them didn't care if they qualified as a wicked person, whereas the other sought to see himself as a virtuous man when, in fact, he was not.

They soon arrived in front of Zigryl's door. Schumann knocked.

"Yes, come in," came Zigryl's light-hearted voice, and Schumann turned to look at Kay.

"Have a good time."

"Oh, I'm going in alone?"

Kay grabbed Schumann before he could make his escape.

He seemed to be wondering why only the two of them were to get to know each other when all three of them would be on the trip. Perhaps he'd instinctively sensed danger. Schumann did his best to smile as gently as he could to the suddenly anxious Kay.

"Well, you see, I've already eaten."

* * *

The moment Kay entered, he noticed the duke sitting in front of a table set for two. His beautiful golden hair fell down to his shoulders as he sat without his hat and his coat. Kay suddenly wondered if the room was too seedy for a man like him—something that only someone like Elvan would worry about.

Kay knew that this was the biggest and nicest guest room in the castle. It was probably lackluster compared to the duke's own home, but it wasn't a complete shambles. It was a passable room that could be offered as a chamber to a prominent guest without seeming rude. Given how eye-catching the duke was, however, the room looked run down in comparison.

“Come on in, Kay,” the duke said welcomingly. Kay smiled, hiding his slight discomfort. The duke was already seated at the table, and attendants that Kay had seen before in various parts of the castle were waiting on him, hardly daring to raise their heads.

“Oh, uh, thank you for inviting me, Your Grace.”

The duke laughed in an easygoing manner and waved his hand in deprecation.

“Oh no. No need to thank me. This food was offered to me by the castle you live in. I don’t want to claim credit for this. You should come to my castle one of these days, after all this is over. I’ll let you thank me properly, then.”

The words were truly unassuming.

Kay simply smiled back without a word, thinking the invitation was just a passing show of politeness that wasn’t supposed to be accepted. That was why he was shocked when the duke smiled and narrowed his eyes.

“Didn’t you hear me, Kay? Come see me in my castle after this is over.”

The sharpness in the voice, as well as the squinted purple eyes, made Kay stammer.

“Oh, uh, yes. Yes, I understand.”

He would simply have to do everything as the duke wanted. It bothered him that he’d failed to understand the way the duke made conversation again. At this rate, perhaps he would actually upset the man one of these days. He wondered if he’d be thrown in jail or threatened with death for giving the wrong answer to a question.

Kay had only considered it to be a slightly bothersome task, but perhaps it was more dangerous than it seemed. He grew a little worried.

He sat across from the duke at a small table, and familiar attendants who’d been standing beside him began to set it. They seemed very polite and eager today, though this was hardly indicative of their usual behavior. One of them had hands that shook visibly as he laid a spoon in front of Kay. It was a man named Neil who had only recently been hired to work in the castle. He was so pale and trembling that Kay grew concerned. As might have been expected, he dropped a bottle of water as he was filling the cups, spilling the water everywhere.

“Oh!”

Neil grabbed the bottle as it fell, but Kay's clothing was already drenched.

"I-I-I'm sorry! Please forgive me!"

Neil said, quivering with fear. Kay stood up, troubled, and reassured the man he was fine. Neil was busy apologizing, however. His face was so pale that perhaps he would have bitten off his tongue and killed himself on the spot had it been the duke he'd spilled the water on. The other attendants standing nearby looked concerned as well. Napkins were used to wipe the water, but Kay's clothing was already wet.

Kay heard the duke tutting.

"That should have come a while later, after we'd eaten some of the food."

Neil's hand hesitated for a moment as he wiped the water off Kay's chest. Before Kay could notice anything amiss with this comment, however, Neil resumed, trembling and rushing to dry Kay's clothing. Kay pushed the man's hand away, trying to calm him, and spoke to the duke, who had his chin cupped.

"I apologize for the interruption to your meal, Your Highness."

If what Kay had seen of the man was to be believed, the duke would smile and say it was fine. But he instead narrowed his eyes at the attendant.

"You can't do anything right, can you? I don't need servants like you waiting on us. All of you, out."

"Y-Your Highness..."

"Your Highness, please forgive our lowly souls..."

The attendants began to beg for his forgiveness all at once, but the duke wiped his mouth with a napkin and slowly stood up. Kay noticed him reaching for his sword and shouted in shock, "W-we'll leave right now!"

Kay despised himself for thinking that the duke might be a good man after hearing what Schumann told him earlier. His lack of information had led to a confusing mix of the charm that came from the duke's handsome looks and the distress that came from the unpredictable way he spoke, but now he knew for certain.

This duke was well and truly out of his mind, completely unhinged. Throwing out the attendants for spilling some water wasn't atrocious, though it did seem a little too touchy. There were some ridiculous nobles

out there who derived their self-worth from temper tantrums and trampling down others.

But what other way was there to refer to someone who reached for his sword the moment he found something not to his liking? The smile that had seemed so sweet earlier now appeared to be aglow with the light of pure madness. And more than anything, most confusing of all was the fact that he was smiling in this situation.

Kay recalled he'd seen the same thing when the duke had held a sword to the count's throat. Kay had assumed that the duke's nerves had been frayed after his men had gone missing, but now Kay could see this wasn't the case. He could also understand what Schumann had said about the duke being fair to everyone—the duke was "fair" in the sense that he treated everyone he met, noble or otherwise, in the same atrocious manner.

Kay quickly turned, intending to pull Neil up from his knees and take everyone outside, when something flashed past his face.

There was a resounding metallic ringing, and Kay froze. Blood drained from his face just like it had from Neil's earlier. A few bits of cut hair fluttered down to his shoulder and floor like so many snowflakes. The duke had thrown his sword, and it was half-buried in the wall in front of Kay's face, quivering from the impact. A single inch closer, and he would have died without even feeling anything.

"My my, your pretty hair. What a pity," he heard the batty duke mutter. Kay turned rigidly and found the duke smiling lazily.

"Where do you think you're going, Kay? You should stay."

"Well... I think I'll need to change, Your Highness."

It was on the tip of his tongue to say he didn't want to spend the evening with a lunatic, but he forced himself to smile. If he provoked the man, he might really end up with a blade buried in his forehead.

"It's fine. You look lovely just as you are."

That's not the point, is it? Kay wondered, so confused he could hardly speak. The attendants, having figured out the kind of man they were dealing with, had already run from the room. Kay was alone with him now, and he positively despised the situation.

"Well, I feel cold. I'd *very much* like to change."

The duke cocked his head.

“You’re cold? I guess the room’s a little cold. The castle doesn’t seem to treat its guests very well. Do you think the count meant to snub me? What do you say?”

Kay stared for a moment. “Actually... I’m not that cold after all.”

The duke had produced a dagger from his belt, as if willing to go and kill the count for the disservice. Kay tucked his tail between his legs and returned to his seat. He was on tenterhooks, and overwhelmed with discomfort.

“You must have been hungry,” the duke said.

Kay forced bits of meat that he hadn’t even cut properly into his mouth and smiled as if to say, *Yes, I was dying of hunger, in fact.* The only way out seemed to be to cram his mouth full of food. He would have to spend the entire day with this jackass again tomorrow, but he was too desperate to extricate himself from the room to think about that right now.

The duke watched him with a satisfied smile as he rushed to eat his share.

“Here, have some of this, too.”

“Uh... Thank you...”

Not wanting to find out what the duke would say if he refused, Kay quietly took the offered plate. Glancing at the steak, which was untouched, he bit back a sigh. It seemed his plan to leave after quickly finishing the meal was no good.

“Do I scare you?”

Kay froze as he avoided the grinning duke’s eyes and cut his steak.

“I... beg your pardon?”

Kay *was* frightened. He was extremely anxious—he felt as though a single misspoken word, and he’d be dead before he could even say, “Mercy!” He had no way to stop the duke’s sword. If he had the skill to stop a weapon wielded with such skill, he wouldn’t be a vice captain of the guard in this obscure castle—instead, he would be the vice captain of the Imperial Guard. And even if one could block the angry weapon of a noble, it would only be depriving oneself of the opportunity for a painless death.

“You seem to be avoiding my eyes,” the duke kindly explained, which was quite unlike him. Kay felt sweat dribble down his forehead. His

response was likely to decide his fate, and his heart beat at a frenetic pace.

Kay gulped as he stared at the duke, and the man smiled a slightly bitter smile. Kay let instinct take over as he said, “N-no. That’s not true.”

His gut seemed to have guided him in the right direction since the grand duke smiled sweetly. It was a truly innocent smile—or so Kay would have thought, had he not known more about the man.

“That’s good. I really like you, you see.”

Kay tried to laugh. Did the duke mean that he wouldn’t kill Kay as easily? Kay couldn’t be sure of even that, so he looked downward and focused on cutting his steak.

“Kay, do you prefer money or power?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Well, I suppose those two things do go hand in hand. Perhaps the question is pointless. But are you drawn more to one than the other?”

I’m interested in neither, he thought, but he couldn’t tell the duke that. Noticing the silence, the duke cocked his head perceptively.

“You don’t like either? What do you like, then? Women? They’re part of the package, aren’t they?”

Kay swallowed some steak, noticing the almost nitpicking tone. He looked at the duke.

“What is it that you want?” said the duke with the purest of faces, as though he were a lover asking his woman if there was anything, anything at all, she wanted. This analogy seemed somewhat accurate since the duke seemed willing to offer Kay whichever he chose.

“...”

Ever since Kay had become capable of thinking for himself, there hadn’t been a single person who’d offered him something good at no cost. Some openly demanded compensation, and though others claimed they wanted nothing in return, this never turned out to be true in the end. Even if they weren’t aware of it, people always expected for a favor to be reciprocated, even with something as insignificant as emotional crumbs. But just because Kay knew these things didn’t mean he lacked trust in other people or was antisocial. He knew that it wasn’t a bad thing that people were always like this. However, he’d learned one thing through his experience—any kindness offered without any apparent motive or desire for something in

return was dangerous. What was more, he was dealing with a man that was dangerously unhinged.

“I’m... happy with what I have at the moment.”

“Are you?”

Kay wondered if the duke would refute him again, but the man nodded with surprising simplicity.

“Then what is it that you wish to protect the most? Family?”

“I beg your pardon? Oh. No, I have no family.”

Kay was an orphan through and through. The duke frowned slightly.

“Do you have anything you wish to protect, then? People you like? Your possessions? Or perhaps the safety of the count, if nothing else.”

“Yes, well... those things matter to me, too.” Kay nodded, thinking that the duke would probably be angry if he said he had no desire to protect such things. The duke seemed displeased, even though Kay had tried to give him an adequate answer. He spoke in an irritable tone,

“Are you done eating?”

Kay had been waiting for this very question. He quickly nodded.

“Yes.” His clothes were damp, and he’d been growing increasingly nervous to be around the duke, who seemed unhappy for some reason.

“It seems I’ve been eating for too long. You need your rest. If you’ll excuse me, Your Highness, I’ll be on my way.”

“To where?”

Home, of course... Kay was about to say. But the duke’s next words stumped him.

“It’s very late, and it’s dangerous to be out at this hour. You should stay the night.”

The night was not all that deep. His home wasn’t so far that he was in danger of being mugged, and being waylaid wasn’t something he was afraid of. Well, perhaps he’d be worried if the captain was the one attacking him, but he was probably less dangerous than this duke. Kay was unable to even laugh, so confused was he, and the duke slowly rose to come over to him.

“Uh... In that case... I’ll stay in the castle. I guess we’ll meet tomorrow morning...”

His voice trailed off as the duke came closer. Kay knew this kind of distance well. It was close enough for a kiss.

“Y-Your Highness?”

“You can call me Zigryl.”

Kay backed away, not wanting to do anything of the sort. It was absurd to think this might be a kiss, but there was an unnaturally friendly smile on the duke’s face.

“Kay? I said you can call me Zigryl.”

“How would I dare?” Kay replied, hesitantly backing away some more. The duke continued to beam at him.

“You’re a bit slow on the uptake, aren’t you? Now, where did I leave my sword?” he muttered, and the words shot out of Kay’s mouth.

“Z-Zigryl?”

Zigryl, the grand duke, smiled contentedly.

“Ah, yes. Kay. Why are you backing away like that?”

“Haha. Did I? I wasn’t aware. It must be my sore feet. I-if you’ll excuse me...”

Kay wanted to bow and leave, but Zigryl was in front of the door. To Kay, Zigryl seemed like a gigantic mountain looming before him—and this particular mountain was slowly taking measured steps toward Kay. A sense of danger Kay couldn’t place sent a chill down his spine. The urge to back away was instinctive and doing so only made him feel as though he was backing into a corner. He hadn’t taken more than a few steps, but the wall was already at his back. It was on the tip of his tongue to scream that the room was pretty small, after all.

“You’re cute when you’re shaking.”

The sweet smile on the duke’s face created the impression that of petals whirling in the air, though his words sounded like those of a street ruffian about to harass an unfortunate woman.

Zigryl’s hand slid over Kay’s cheek, which was damp with sweat. Though the hand was pale and slender, the palm was large and rough enough to prove that it was a man’s.

“Open your mouth.”

“I’m sorry?” Something warm and soft came into contact with his lips as he spoke.

His current posture was one that he was familiar with, but also felt quite strange. He was backed against a wall for a kiss. Kay was very used to

kissing, of course, but never in his life had his partner been taller than him.

Zigryl's firm hand, which had wrapped around Kay's cheek, dug into his hair and forced him to tilt his head back. A moist tongue pushed its way in between his lips. Only when that tongue had slid across Kay's own like a slithering snake did he jerk back and swing his fist out of reflex. The punch landed squarely on Zigryl's cheek, and when he backed away, there was blood on his lips.

"Wh-what are you doing?" Kay shouted, taken aback that Zigryl didn't seem to feel much pain at all even though it had been a hard punch—in fact, he was grinning. The grand duke wiped the blood from his lips and asked pleasantly, "And what do *you* think you're doing?"

"I'm sorry?" Kay scowled, even more confused. Zigryl looked at him as if enjoying a spectacle, then rested his hands against the wall, entrapping Kay against it. Then he moved closer again. Kay cringed in response to the shadow that loomed overhead and the intense discomfort he felt from the situation. His hands were shaking.

"Who do you think you just punched? You don't think you'll be allowed to live after drawing a grand duke's blood, do you?"

Kay felt the blood rush out of his face. Anyone who was asked this question would think that the answer was no, and so did Kay. He stared, his face devoid of color, as Zigryl agreeably uttered words that were clearly a threat.

"Y-Your Highness..."

"My goodness, it looks like you're a very slow learner."

Zigryl ran his hand through his hair and buried a knife he produced from his waist into the wall right next to Kay's head. The blade sank in like the wall was made of putty, and Kay muttered, pale as a corpse, "Z-Z-Zigryl."

Zigryl smiled contentedly as he tapped Kay's rigid cheeks.

"Yes, Kay. That's a good boy. Now listen quietly. Let me tell you how severe a crime it is to attempt the murder of a grand duke."

Kay gasped at the kind tone that delivered such frightful words.

"M-murder? Y-Your... I mean, Zigryl."

Kay quickly called him Zigryl before Zigryl could pull the dagger out of the wall. Sweat trickled down his temples. If he called Zigryl "Your Highness" by mistake again, he would likely die from a heart attack long before Zigryl ever drew his sword.

“You don’t seem to like the word ‘murder.’ Kay, you are a soldier. Surely you know how easy it is for a person to die? You don’t seem aware of how much that punch just now hurt. I really thought I was going to die. What if you’d hit me on the forehead or my temple by mistake? Aren’t I right?”

“But that’s not true...”

It was such a ridiculous fallacy that Kay didn’t know what to say. Perhaps he would have thought differently if Zigryl had so much as batted an eye after being hit. The man had grinned and backed away as if he’d been expecting it, and now he was raising a huge fuss. It left Kay nonplussed. Kay opened his mouth to protest, but Zigryl spoke sternly.

“What do you mean, it’s not true? Why don’t I go out there and ask someone if that wasn’t an assassination attempt? Are you saying I’m claiming something absurd?”

Kay believed this man was far worse than absurd—he was out of his mind. But he couldn’t nod in agreement. Zigryl pulled him along, saying they should head outside this instant, and Kay nearly jumped.

“N-no. There’s no need to do that.”

Even if they did, there was no one in the castle that was brave enough to say no to Zigryl’s question. If it was the grand duke speaking, most people would nod even if he claimed that he had already been murdered—and Kay was among them. He would have done the same if this hadn’t directly concerned him.

The grand duke smiled sweetly with his eyes as he held onto Kay’s wrist.

“You *did* try to murder me, right?”

“But that’s hardly—”

“Now, now. Attempted murder alone is enough to doom everyone in this castle to a cell and torture so severe they’ll beg to be killed. You don’t really have to try to make me any more angry than I already am. Do you see what I mean? Do you think I’m joking?”

The grin on Zigryl’s face was a very handsome one, but Kay’s vision was obscured with indignation and frustration. All he saw was a demon smiling at him.

Kay gripped Zigryl’s clothes with quivering hands. He wasn’t sure what he’d done to deserve this, but at the moment, this man held all the cards.

Would falling to his knees and bowing until his forehead touched the ground allow him to be forgiven? His brain told him this was rather unrealistic, but his body was tense and cowering. Zigryl looked on with a merciful expression on his face.

“Now, do you feel motivated to continue our kiss?”

“I’m... sorry?”

Kay said, his eyes widening at this unexpected question. Zigryl didn’t wait, bending over and sucking on Kay’s lower lip. Gripping Kay’s hair and tilting his head back, Zigryl explored his mouth even more deeply and intimately than before.

This time Kay could do nothing to resist, not even ball up his fists. He could only grip Zigryl’s clothing even harder as he held his breath, and he was forced to bear it as Zigryl’s tongue slithered about the inside of his mouth as if it belonged there. Kay tasted salty blood. Zigryl bit and sucked at Kay’s lips and whispered,

“Stick out your tongue, Kay.”

“Z-Zigryl, I’m not—”

The man’s restless voice alarmed Kay—this was a different kind of threat than mortal danger. Alarm bells went off in his head, but Zigryl furrowed his brow and whispered, “Hurry now.”

Kay did as he was told, like a well-trained puppy.

Zigryl sucked on the tongue, then wrapped his own tongue around it. The technique was so good Kay’s knees nearly gave way. If it hadn’t been for the current situation, he’d have wanted to close his eyes and give in to the pleasure. He kept on telling himself that he had no choice, that the grand duke was forcing him, but his tongue was slowly starting to reciprocate instinctively. Saliva mixed, and tongues intertwined. It was a jumble of lewd biting and sucking, a lascivious kiss reminiscent of sex. Kay was starting to grow dizzy when he felt Zigryl’s hand move up from his waist to his chest. The tongue that had deftly enticed Kay’s own now moved to his earlobes. Something stiff kept on colliding and gliding past his thighs. The lips moved to Kay’s exposed neck, nipping it dangerously, and Kay spoke cautiously without moving a muscle.

“Uh... Zigryl...”

Instead of responding, Zigryl sucked on Kay’s neck hard enough to hurt, leaving hickeys in the process. His fingers were quickly traveling over

Kay’s nipples.

“Uh... If I may ask... Please don’t think of it as rude. I know... I know that I have no right to ask, but still... Do you happen to have a preference for men...”

Zigryl stopped licking near Kay’s collarbone and smiled sheepishly.

“Are you curious about that?”

Yeah, very much so. Kay nodded stiffly. Zigryl said in a generous tone,

“I’ll tell you in bed.”

“Actually, I think it was rude of me to ask. You don’t need to tell me after all.”

Gingerly moving Zigryl’s hand away from his chest, Kay forced a smile and moved along the wall, extricating himself from Zigryl’s arms. He expected Zigryl to stop him, but the man simply moved aside. As Kay sidestepped out of the way, he found himself glancing at Zigryl’s groin. As expected, there was a raging erection from the recent kiss. Kay couldn’t help but picture the penis that those pants contained.

He was no idiot—he knew how men had sex. From the way Zigryl had mentioned the bed, it was clear that he didn’t simply want to kiss or hold hands. He stared in a daze at the protuberance between the smiling man’s legs, then started backing away, moving about six paces. He couldn’t remember who he’d heard it from, but he’d been told that it hurt like hell. The size of Zigryl’s cock, which was apparent from the bulge, gave him goosebumps all over his arms. Kay kept on moving backward as if he’d just seen something horrifying.

Zigryl watched him quietly, then grinned as he walked over to the bed. The erection between his legs looked quite uncomfortable, but it didn’t seem to affect his gait at all. The bed was large enough for five or six grown men, and when Zigryl was sitting on it, it suddenly appeared to be a very lewd and obscene space. He began unbuttoning his shirt and spoke to Kay, who’d reached the door.

“Are you going to leave?”

Kay glimpsed hard muscles through the open shirt. He reached behind him, watching Zigryl warily, and he felt the doorknob. Kay was ready to rush out of the room at any moment. If Zigryl approached him, he would run out there and claim that Zigryl had tried to rape him.

But wait, what happens then? His mind went blank as he tried to figure out what would happen. Zigryl was kind enough to explain it for him.

“I would personally advise against that decision. What will you do out there? You’ll be interrogated for attempted assassination of the grand duke. Your tongue and eyes will be pulled out, and you won’t even be able to ask for a swift death as you await your inevitable doom. I suppose your legs will be cut and, soon, swarm with maggots. But you won’t be treated—you’ll squirm in pain and die in abject misery. Or perhaps you’re thinking of running away to some foreign kingdom? As you know, all the nations around here belong to the empire. An easy death will elude you wherever you go. Is that what you want? This will be over soon if you just close your eyes for a bit and relax.”

The imagery, delivered cheerfully, was so vivid in his head that Kay wanted to vomit. He wanted to shout that this was madness, but he knew that the reality would be no different—if not worse.

“Why... why are you doing this to me? Did I do something to offend you? Did I commit some crime against you?” Kay asked, wanting to cry.

Zigryl made a “come hither” gesture with his finger and said, “I find you cute and attractive.”

“I... beg your pardon?”

“I just told you that you’re attractive. You’re no woman. How many times must I tell you before you’re happy?”

He was treating Kay like an immature young girl who kept wanting to be reminded of her beauty. Zigryl had been telling him that he was handsome and whatnot since earlier in the day, but Kay hadn’t once imagined that he’d meant it. Seeing Zigryl call an ordinary man attractive, cute, or whatever reminded Kay of the questionable things that he’d said earlier in the day.

“Come on. You’ll prefer the bed to the floor when we get started. It’s carpeted, yes, but it’ll still hurt your knees.”

Kay stared at the disgusting lips that sounded worried his knees might bruise. Then he asked, “Will... will one time suffice?”

A single time might be bearable if he focused his mind on other things. As the saying went, a living dog was better than a dead lion. He could live with being a dog. But that aside, Kay absolutely abhorred the thought of

torture. If a single night of sex could be the means of avoiding that, it seemed to be an acceptable option.

Zigryl smirked as if he found Kay's question silly.

"You'll forgive me for hitting your face afterward?"

"Do I look so vindictive to you? Come on."

Kay went over to him, his legs shaky. After being bereaved of his parents at a young age and coming to Lablen, he'd done all sorts of unmentionable things. But who knew he'd be forced to sleep with a man, much less than a nobleman who held Kay's life in his hands would be the partner?

Suddenly feeling like an unsullied maiden, he stood in front of Zigryl, who pulled him into the bed by the hand. This wasn't his first unwilling night of sex, but he'd never had to offer it in return for his life before. And he certainly had never slept with a man. Cold sweat trickled down his back. He grew tense, realizing that his life was in quite the shambles.

He felt soft, plush sheets against his back. Elvan had probably made sure to prepare sheets of the highest quality for the grand duke, though he probably had no idea of the purpose it would be used for.

Groaning, Kay looked up at the huge man who straddled him in an instant. He was handsome, to be sure. The golden hair that flowed down past the fair face almost seemed beautiful. Considering the situation that he was in, the fact that he was able to have such thoughts at all was a testament to Zigryl's beauty. In fact, it was hard to imagine that this man had just gotten on top of another using underhanded threats. There was a confident, dignified look on his face that even made Kay feel a bit indignant.

"Now that I'm looking down at you from this position, you're even more..."

Zigryl trailed off, his breathing rougher than before. He unbuttoned the rest of his shirt and tossed it aside. Kay groaned and furrowed his brow. He'd noticed the muscles, but Zigryl's body was even better built than he'd expected. There was nothing feminine about that body at all. Such well-defined muscles weren't the result of simple exercise. Be it in battle or otherwise, it was clear that Zigryl had been using them. His skin was fair as well, but it looked smooth and healthy in a way that was slightly different from how a woman's would look. When Zigryl undid his pants and lowered them, Kay gasped involuntarily. The thing between the grand duke's legs

was far more intimidating than he'd expected. Sweat trickled down around his ears. *And the angle at which it's hanging... Is it because of the weight?*

Perhaps noticing that Kay was cowed, Zigryl smiled cordially and nudged his cock.

"That's not all of it."

"I'm sorry?"

"It's not."

It wasn't surprising that Kay failed to understand, but the intense look in Zigryl's eyes and the way he pointed to his member suggested something to Kay.

"No... It can't be..."

He really thought it was impossible. *He can't mean it's not fully hard yet, can he?* The thought was so silly and horrible that a disbelieving laugh escaped him. Sadly, he was wrong.

"You've got to be kidding—"

As Kay spoke, Zigryl took Kay's hand, wrapped it around his penis, and rubbed it up and down. Kay flinched at the feel of someone else's penis—this was a first for him—but he could feel the organ growing rapidly after a few strokes. Kay's eyes widened to an impossible extent.

"Th-th-this can't be real!"

"Don't be scared. It won't kill you."

Zigryl shoved Kay's hand away and, with a relaxed smile, began undoing the buttons of Kay's shirt.

Kay felt his mind go blank for a moment as Zigryl's fully erect member swung about. *That thing is going into my ass? That can't be right.* The flesh down there was already so tender, it could be damaged even when performing its intended purpose. How did it make any sense for something that big to enter through the exit?

Kay was paralyzed. Zigryl's fingers snaked in through an opening in Kay's pants and felt his anal opening. Kay felt chills shoot down his spine, and a pale Kay cautiously pushed Zigryl's hand away and moved back.

"I-I can't do this. I'm sorry, Zigryl. I'd rather..."

The words *I'd rather die* refused to leave Kay's lips when he noticed the look in Zigryl's eyes.

"Z-Zig—"

"I guess asking nicely simply isn't going to work, is it?"

The ever-present smile disappeared, replaced by a cold, expressionless mask. It was filled with a chilling hostility and madness.

Kay realized he'd made a mistake, all his senses warning him of impending danger. He moved in a panic, trying to jump off the bed, but before he could do so, Zigryl's hand grabbed the back of his neck and threw him back onto the bed.

"Ugh!"

The impact knocked the air out of his lungs, and a vice-like grip closed around his neck. It was just a single hand, but a massive force pushed down on his airway, and Kay reddened, choking and writhing.

He scratched with his fingernails, but Zigryl casually rubbed his chin with his other hand and said in a relaxed tone, "This is closer to my style, to be honest. I like my men lachrymose."

The whites of Kay's eyes were starting to show, his consciousness fading away, when Zigryl released his grip.

Kay coughed violently, his hands to his neck, as he rolled around. Zigryl grabbed the hair on the back of Kay's head roughly and pulled. This flipped Kay over onto his stomach, and before he could even catch his breath, hard flesh was pushed into his mouth.

"Now suck. You'll..." Zigryl trailed off at the sight of Kay's face.

Kay was shocked by the penis in his mouth, but his throat was also hurting terribly. Tears were flowing out of his eyes. Zigryl stared for some time, mesmerized by the sight of Kay's face as he cried with Zigryl's penis between his lips. The wrath slowly a faded from his eyes, replaced slowly by an intense lust tainted with madness.

"I knew I'd like you," he muttered like a lunatic. Then he moistened his lips like a gourmet before a meal, letting out a very nasty laugh.

Schumann, who'd offered Kay to Zigryl like a sacrifice to some hideous monster, was staying in the next room. He'd heard something fall, accompanied by a crushing noise. Then a blade had emerged from the wall. From the speed and precision of the blade, Schumann was willing to bet that Zigryl was responsible. He tutted. He could guess what was going on in the next room.

"Why are the walls so thin? I'll die before my time if I stay close to the wall," the selfish Schumann said, apparently unconcerned by the fact that an innocent's life was being threatened in the adjacent room. The walls

seemed incapable of muffling sound, and he had a feeling that some distasteful noises were about to commence.

Schumann took his seat on a plushy sofa far from the wall and began to look through the documents he'd collected. They were the reports about Edor and the Forest of the Dead he'd found in the castle. The records were extensive and unorganized, so he planned to only have a cursory look through them.

He was flipping haphazardly through the pages when he slowed down, eventually coming to a halt. A troubled look came over his face.

"Well, what do we have here? No wonder I had a bad feeling about this place."

It's a dangerous region. He muttered the words in a barely audible tone, sucking his teeth. He underlined the center of the page he was looking at with his pen.

"Year 42 of the Imperial Calendar. Confirmed spread of 'obellus' in the basin adjacent to mountains in the far north. Forty-two of fifty-eight residents in the region have died. All survivors were quarantined upon discovery, but four of them attempted suicide. All other survivors died seemingly natural deaths within the year. The authorities closed off the region for the following ten years and dispatched magicians to wipe out the obellus entirely. One class II magician died in the process. The ecosystem was inspected at a later date [...] Those who wished were allowed to settle in the region..."

"Obellus" were hallucinogenic plants. Most hallucinogens could lead to death when overdosed, but obellus were far more potent. It deadened the intellect and magnified the latent violence in a person, turning them into the equivalent of a beast that had starved for a week.

"Just like one person I know."

Schumann clucked his tongue, thinking of his liege, who usually acted in the exact same way most of the time. If multiple people who'd imbibed an obellu were placed in the same location, the result would be something akin to the ancient carnivals—a scene of blood, death, and unbelievable

outrage. Whether one had actually eaten the plant didn’t matter—being near one was enough of a curse, and an inescapable one.

The noxious plant spread far too quickly, and once it took root, the services of several expensive magicians would be required to completely eradicate it. Because it was so dangerous, governments extended their support when it was detected. But by the time the news reached these governments, there were usually too few left alive to be saved.

“Hugh can’t have been mistaken, can he?”

Schumann wasn’t worried about the obellu itself, of course. He was a talented magician, and some plant known to have gone extinct fifty-odd years ago was no problem for him; the problem was that Alosha’s Flower, the plant they were looking for, was very similar in appearance to an obellu. In fact, if the flower was not blooming, it was nearly identical to an obellu, which made it very difficult to tell them apart.

The fact that the two plants could have grown in the same region gave rise to quite an ominous hypothesis.

What if Hugh had been mistaken? If the Alosha’s Flower found in Edor was actually an obellu...

Schumann shuddered at the terrible image this conjured up.

“That can’t be possible. Certainly not.”

It was impossible—he simply couldn’t accept it. He kept on telling himself this as he put down the documents, trying to push the sinister possibility from his mind. “I wish I’d never read that,” he muttered. Then, grabbing a bottle of wine from the table, he gulped it down crudely and wiped the liquid trickling down his chin roughly like a ruffian. A long sigh he couldn’t restrain escaped him like a belch, then he got up with an uncomfortable look on his face. He would have to prepare for eventualities.

OceanofPDF.com

ACT 2.
The Forest of the Dead

Kay trembled, a chill coursing through his body the moment he saw the man's eyes. His gut told him that if he resisted now, he was a dead man. He was like a frog caught in the eyes of a snake—unable to move a single muscle.

As the saying went, the eye was the window to the soul, and a glance at Zigryl's eyes made it abundantly clear that he wasn't quite sane. They'd been a graceful purple before, but now they glinted to the point of seeming close to blood-red. He was off his rocker.

There were two things in this world that were to be feared the most—a strong man who wouldn't listen to sense, and a man who was fucked up in the head. Zigryl was both, and on top of all that, he was also a powerful man. A single one of these traits would have been frightening enough, but Zigryl had them all, and he seemed very far gone to boot. Kay turned yellow with fear and shook all over.

He hesitated with Zigryl's penis in his mouth, and Zigryl had him sit up. Zigryl was a young man who was handsome to the point of being beautiful, but seeing his eyes from up close was a harrowing experience. Kay had a feeling that giving himself up to some old and wizened pervert might be preferable to this.

Kay cringed when Zigryl licked his chops and stared at him. He asked in a shaky voice, "I-I have a question... Y-you're not going to kill me, are you?"

Zigryl narrowed his eyes and looked Kay up and down.

"Nobody's died yet. But then again, I don't think I can guarantee it with you... I didn't know I'd like you this much, to be honest. You came out of nowhere, so to speak. Oh, what to do?" Zigryl said slowly. Kay wanted to grab the man by the throat and shout at him that he'd lost his mind, but instead turned away like a coward.

"You mean... I might die during the act?"

Zigryl breathed hard, licking away some of the tears that remained near Kay's eyes. "You're driving me nuts," he muttered. Kay was shocked at the thought that this man's lunacy hadn't yet reached its maximum potential. He stopped for a moment to wonder what that would even look like, and the thought nearly choked him.

"Can't you let me live?" he pleaded, wisely doing away with any semblance of pride. Zigryl pushed him down onto the bed and said,

"Well, I'll try. But if you keep crying like that—god, it's so beautiful—I might not be able to control myself."

"Kgh! W-wait! Ow! W-wait!"

Kay begged, but Zigryl only pushed harder. Kay could feel that Zigryl was fully inside him now. The pain caused his vision to cloud, and he gasped for air with his mouth wide open. He'd resolved to never cry after what Zigryl had said about losing control, but the tears that flowed down his cheeks now were physiological in origin. Zigryl had used plenty of scented oil to loosen him up down there, it seemed, but it still hurt just enough to kill him. Kay's bottom was raised, and he felt lukewarm liquid dribbling down his back. His knees were pushed up to the point of nearly touching his chest, and that was a different sort of pain—though it didn't come close to the pain in his anus. His intestines felt as though they'd been turned inside out, and he could feel the massive member pulsing inside his body. He gritted his teeth, but the moans escaped him anyway, accompanied by saliva. Zigryl licked Kay's lip erotically.

"Don't bite your lip. Let me hear more of that, Kay."

This man was a pervert through and through. Kay wasn't able to loosen his gritted teeth, not particularly because he wanted to avoid screaming, but because of the pain. He felt Zigryl staring at his face.

The proximity of the red eyes filled him with fear. Before he could even shrink back, however, Zigryl began to move.

"Ugh!" Kay gasped loudly. The thing in his bottom seemed to slip out slightly before shoving inward again. Kay's entire body was pulled along with it, then pushed. There was a loud squelching noise as fluids, flesh, and the interior of his rectum were smashed together. It was like someone had

shoved a hot knife into his gut. The pain nearly made him spasm, and he writhed. Zigryl only moved harder.

“Augh! Kgh! Ugh! Ugh—gah!”

The sensation of Zigryl’s rigid hair and testicles slapping against him was agonizing. The weapon that dug—that seemed to be the only way to describe it—at the lining of his rectum made Kay scream at the top of his lungs. The mere fact that Zigryl was inside him was enough to make him faint, but his short, powerful thrusts prompted ear-splitting screams and spasms. His entire body was covered with sweat. Zigryl’s hands grabbed Kay’s squirming arms in a vice-like grip, and Kay, unable to resist, shrieked and sobbed.

“W-wait... Kgh! P-please... please!” Kay begged him to stop for a moment amid the screeching that escaped his lips incessantly. Zigryl gave a final gentle thrust, breathing slowly. Then he slowed down a little.

“Does it hurt that much?”

Kay wished he could kill the man.

The penis had stopped moving inside him, and a wave of pain coursed through his body. Trying not to faint, he opened his mouth, then closed it again. *Yes, it’s killing me*, he wanted to say, but he was having such difficulty breathing, he couldn’t say a word. Zigryl licked his lips seductively and smiled lazily. There was something clearly deranged about that smile. Kay grabbed Zigryl’s arm with a quivering hand.

“Z-Zigryl... P-please. Please let me live...” Kay repeated, his voice hoarse and strange. It was hard to speak with such a large object inside of him, but he entreated for all he was worth.

Zigryl looked down at him for a good while before exhaling quietly.

“You know what? This won’t do.”

What did he mean? That Kay would have to die? Kay forgot his pain for a moment and gulped in terror. Zigryl soon sank even deeper inside him, however, as he bent low to bite Kay’s nipples, and Kay shuddered. Kay began to choke and shiver again, and Zigryl continued to give his sick smile, slowly moving himself back. Kay could clearly feel him slowly pulling out, his entire insides rushing to fill up the empty space left behind, as if to push away the rest of the retreating penis. Zigryl was almost out when he drove his member all the way in again.

Kay’s mouth opened wide, the whites of his eyes showing. He couldn’t scream, or even breathe, for that matter, the pain was so incredible. Then Zigryl slid out slowly again. Kay sank his nails into Zigryl’s arms. This retraction only felt like a precursor to a repetition of what had just happened, and a terror even greater than the pain came over him. As Kay sweated hard, horrified and suffering, Zigryl whispered in a voice shuddering with delight, “I told you, didn’t I? If you cry like that, I’ll lose control.”

* * *

This was no different from lying with any other man.

Kay’s looks were a little more to his taste than usual, of course, and he’d gotten more excited than was his wont at the sight of the tears, but he hadn’t deviated from routine.

When he saw someone he liked, he seduced them slowly, turning to threats if necessary. There were few people in the world who could deny the grand duke, after all. Most undressed themselves once they were in his bed. Some even thought of him as a benefactor of some sort. Such men believed that they could become the trusted vassals of the grand duke, while women thought they would become his wife—or his mistress, at the least. They were never correct, as it turned out.

Kay’s reactions weren’t particularly different from the norm, either. Most men would feel repulsed by the idea of sleeping with a man, even if it was the grand duke who was asking for it. In such cases, Zigryl tied them up or drugged them before satisfying his needs. There was nothing different about Kay thus far.

It was only when the sex had ended did he realize that tonight wasn’t the same as the others. Following his ejaculation, he realized that he’d lost control of himself during the lovemaking. He could recall plunging his penis into Kay’s anus and thrusting hard, but Kay was now lying on his belly instead of his back. A change in position wasn’t anything special, but Zigryl couldn’t remember how it had happened. It also surprised him somewhat to see that Kay had fainted, semen bubbling out of his bloated asshole. Zigryl had been rough, yes, but had he been this rough?

Perhaps it's just been too long, he thought with a contented smile. His desire tended to flag after he'd climaxed, but as he stared at Kay's back, he had another erection. Setting aside any further thought, he picked the unconscious Kay lightly in his arms, showered him with kisses, and entered him again. Being oblivious, Kay was as loose as could be. It hit Zigryl then why he'd suddenly lost track of himself earlier. His reason evaporated like gasoline tossed into a fire.

The pulsating motion seemed to jostle Kay severely, as he moaned faintly without coming to. Kay's face was contorted, and Zigryl ran his tongue over it. The salty taste of the tears and skin made him feel hungry all of a sudden. He wanted to bite into Kay's cheek. The moment he became cognizant of the idea, he found himself already biting. After some sucking and biting, it occurred to him that he really wanted to devour this man. Perhaps it wasn't sexual desire but hunger that burned inside him.

He only woke from his daze when someone jerked hard on his arm.

"Good god, Your Highness!"

Zigryl ground his teeth, a bloody rage filling his veins. Someone had tossed him from his nirvana into the disgusting swamp of reality.

"Wh-what! Don't tell me you went even further this time?" screamed the man. Zigryl glowered, sincerely wondering if he should attack this intruder. That was when cold water was poured over his head and his vision cleared.

"Sch...Schumann?"

Schumann was holding a dripping cup in his hand.

"Yes, it's me. Do you recognize me now?"

"How dare you? Do you realize what you've done?"

The man had interrupted Zigryl during sex and even thrown water on him. That was unheard of, unless there was a real emergency. Zigryl glared at him as if to tell him there would be consequences should there be no emergency at all. Schumann seemed nonplussed.

"What are *you* doing, Your Highness?"

"What?"

Schumann glanced toward the bed and grunted with disgust.

"Good god. You did this all night?"

Schumann stared at the unconscious Kay, commenting the man had been turned into a ragdoll. Zigryl looked at him as well. Kay looked like a corpse, his entire body covered with marks from teeth and slapping. The thighs below his buttocks and the area around his lips were blanketed with semen. Zigryl scowled and muttered, “Wait. It’s already morning?”

How was this possible? Zigryl couldn’t believe it. He’d been inside Kay just moments ago. How could it already be morning? The messy sight did bring back some memories of the previous night. He could vaguely remember Kay waking up for a moment and begging him to stop again. Zigryl had shoved his penis into Kay’s mouth before delving between Kay’s legs and sucking his cock. But even so, all of that seemed to have happened in the blink of an eye—though Kay would beg to differ after such a painful night.

How did Kay have such an effect on me?

Schumann gave him a disgusted look.

“How can you use the word ‘already’ in good conscience? Look what you’ve done to him. How many times did you ejaculate inside him?”

He’d often referred to Zigryl as an animal in passing, but he realized the man was actually closer to a monster—and one of the most dangerous ones out there, in fact. Schumann shuddered and wiped the area around Kay’s mouth with a handkerchief. It seemed too perverted to leave him be in his current state. After that simple wipe, however, he realized that his handkerchief probably couldn’t be reused. He tossed it onto the floor without a second thought and turned away.

“It looks like we’ll have to demand another guide.”

Zigryl, who’d been sitting with a blank look on his face, raised his head instantly and said in a firm tone, “No.”

Schumann, thinking he’d heard wrong, asked, “I’m sorry?”

“I said no, Schumann. I want to take Kay with me.”

Ha! The secretary looked nonplussed at Zigryl’s absurd request.

“You’re taking *him*? Take a look at the state he’s in right now! Are you out of your mind?”

The question was hardly necessary. He knew Zigryl was anything but in his right mind, but he hadn’t expected him to have become incapable of situational thinking. That had been one of the only commendable things about him. How could Schumann ever trust Zigryl now?

“If you wanted to take Kay with you, you should have restrained yourself! Demanding that you want him to go with you won’t change what you’ve done! He can’t even ride a horse. His bottom’s all torn up!”

Zigryl gazed intensely at Schumann and ran a hand through his damp hair. The barbaric look about him vanished, and the gorgeous appearance returned now that his hair was a little more presentable.

“Heal him.”

“What—must I really go that far? Why? I’m sure we can find ourselves another guide,” Schumann asked, uncomprehending. For Schumann, it was preferable to just find someone else instead of going to the trouble of healing Kay.

“Is it because of his looks? I’m sure we can find at least ten people equally handsome as him if we look through the castle. You can take your pick among them.”

Zigryl cut him off coldly.

“Schumann? Don’t make me repeat myself.”

Schumann spun away—the man’s eyes could have frozen the very air around him. Muttering hysterically that Zigryl would be the end of him yet, he rummaged for a magical healing stone from a pouch at his waist. He couldn’t believe he was being forced to use this expensive stone on a man who’d passed out from too much sex. Schumann was a miser through and through, and the thought angered him to no end. He knew, however, that disobeying Zigryl in his current mood would have dire consequences.

He pouted peevishly and glared at Zigryl viciously, even as he did as he was told.

“What are you looking at? The sun rose quite a while ago. Have you forgotten we’re supposed to leave for Edor quickly? Wash yourself and get dressed.”

Schumann glanced at Zigryl’s penis, which was still engorged and dangling. He felt a little pity for Kay, whom he’d been treating as a disposable lackey moments ago. *That horrible thing in his ass... until morning, huh?* It had probably been a hellish experience.

“Do you think Kay will be scared of me?” Zigryl asked, sounding worried. Schumann stared in surprise, his eyes seeming to berate Zigryl for having no conscience.

More importantly, why is he asking such a question? He's never felt guilty about any of his atrocities.

"A near-death experience is frightening for everyone, you know."

Zigryl was making him state the obvious. Schumann shrugged and turned around, placing the fingernail-sized stone in the center of Kay's forehead. *How much did this cost again?* It felt like such a horrid waste of money, the more he thought about it.

"I suppose you're right," Zigryl said.

"Would you rather he wasn't afraid of you?"

"Uh... no. Not really," Zigryl said, shaking his head and tapping the sheets with his fingertips.

"Right. What does it matter even if he is afraid? It doesn't. Not at all." Zigryl muttered like a deranged man, "I was just curious."

Schumann glanced at him, then added some magical powder to a glass of water on the table. The powder dissolved, and a red shimmer appeared above the cup as the water swirled. Magical formulas required the blood of those born with magical talent as a rule, but most individuals with such "blessed blood" were members of the nobility. Understandably, the blood was scarce. Even in cases like Schumann, where the caster had a bit of magic inside him, the fact that he needed to draw blood from his own skin made it preferable and customary to use manufactured magical powder with water instead. The powder had weak augmentation power, making for some weak effects, but that was usually the case of late unless there was some special occasion or battle. It was nothing out of the ordinary, but Zigryl was muttering beside Schumann like a homeless man caught out in the rain.

"You're using powder instead of blood?"

"I'm sorry, what?"

Schumann, who'd been focusing to cast a spell on the solution, wondered if he'd misheard. Zigryl was rubbing his chin and frowning.

"If you use powder, it'll hurt when he wakes up."

"Of course it'll hurt," Schumann said, flabbergasted. While it would hurt more than when blood was used, but healing was healing.

"What are you suggesting? That I draw my own blood? For a man I've never met until yesterday?"

Schumann then moved on to giving a winding speech on how much of a waste using a stone was in the first place.

“You’re the one who slept with him. Why don’t you give him your blood? A drop of your blood will heal him without the slightest hint of pain!”

Schumann couldn’t comprehend why this man was suddenly pretending to be so nice all of a sudden. Not that Zigryl had ever been easy to understand, of course, but there seemed something particularly strange about the way he was acting this morning. Zigryl scowled and got up when Schumann grew irritated at him. He seemed to have finally realized that he wasn’t quite himself. Soon regaining the haughty look in his eyes, he spoke to Schumann, who seemed ready to poke him for some blood at a moment’s notice.

“What are you glaring at me like that for? I pay you plenty of money, don’t I?”

Zigryl berated him lightly for being such a tightwad. It was true that Schumann’s pay was so high as to be unprecedented. He was so rich that he could easily buy an entire castle with the funds currently in his account. A magic stone worth twenty silvers at best would hardly leave a dent in his wallet.

Schumann, however, was obsessed with money to the point that every single coin mattered to him greatly. He ignored Zigryl, using the hand covered with the magical solution to gesture in the air.

* * *

There was the sound of a sled being pulled through snow.

Kay was dreaming about his parents. *Father, why is life so difficult? Why do things have to be so hard?* His father listened to his lament, then kissed his cheek. Kay sat up in shock, only to find a grinning Zigryl standing there instead of his father. He screamed, trying to run, but he couldn’t move. While he writhed, Zigryl got naked and jumped on him. As Kay tried to crawl away, Zigryl pushed him down and shoved his thing into Kay’s anus...

Kay screamed and opened his eyes, drenched with sweat. He saw a round ceiling above him. He wasn’t in the same space he’d been in moments ago. That had been a dream. *It was a dream.* Deeply relieved, he breathed hard and looked around. Before he could figure out what this

shaky, narrow space was, he flinched, noticing that someone blond was asleep and holding his hand. *Whew, that was a scare. I thought it was Zigryl...*

“Yikes!”

Kay sat up with lightning speed, tossing away the hand. This woke Zigryl, who raised his head. The sight of his face made Kay shudder again. Zigryl looked lovely as he rubbed the sleep out of his eyes, but to Kay he was more frightening than an angel of death. He had the heart of a disgusting animal, but he looked shockingly handsome on the outside. Kay resented him all the more for it. Zigryl smiled bitterly when he saw Kay backed up against the wall.

“You’re awake. How are you feeling? You’ve been healed, but there should still be some pain.”

This made Kay aware that he was sore. Cringing so as to put the maximum possible distance between himself and Zigryl, he said, “It’s bearable... Where are we?”

“Where do you think?” Zigryl asked with a grin. Kay didn’t want to answer this question, but he looked around. He heard the sound of crunching snow and hooves. The narrow, wobbly confines gave rise to a single guess.

“W-wait... Don’t tell me this is a carriage?” Kay looked around, and Zigryl complimented him with a smile.

“Yes. We’re in a snow coach, headed to Edor. It’s snowing quite heavily, you see.”

Zigryl pushed aside some curtains for his benefit, revealing heavy snowfall and a whitened forest. The snow-covered trees suggested that they’d been on the road a while. Ice-cold wind and snowflakes flew in through gaps in the window. All of these things meant one thing—no matter how Kay hated being in here with Zigryl, he couldn’t run out of the coach.

“Don’t you feel cold?” Zigryl asked.

Kay was only wearing a thin tunic and pants, and he wanted to ask Zigryl to shut the curtains. He nodded weakly, and Zigryl smiled kindly as he carefully stopped all the cracks with the curtain folds.

“This region is too cold. I hate the cold,” Zigryl said. Not only was he completely covered up in clothing, not a single patch of skin showing, he

also had on a thick cloak with fur along the top. Kay glanced at him, then at the door, wishing he could escape.

“Yes... I see. Then who... Is Master Schumann steering the coach?”

“Yes. Schumann loves to steer.”

Zigryl’s voice must have been audible from outside. Someone banged on the coach from behind Kay and shouted, “Sure I do!” Zigryl laughed, seeming amused by Schumann’s annoyance.

“Uh, why don’t I...” Kay began, seeing his chance and getting up. Zigryl waved at him.

“No, I don’t think you should.”

“What? B-but he’ll be cold, sitting out there alone,” Kay said worriedly, thinking this was his only chance to get out. Zigryl gave a low laugh.

“Yes. It’ll be cold and tough out there. That’s why I’m paying him extra.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Schumann is... terribly obsessed with money.”

Zigryl was probably the most deranged person Kay had ever seen. Hearing him upbraid someone like this was strange to see.

“So if you try to take over on the perch for him, he might murder you in the cruelest way imaginable.”

This time, Schumann seemed to be in agreement. Kay heard no rebuttal from behind his back. Instead, there was a quiet, cheerful humming.

Kay had resolved not to travel with these men no matter what happened as Zigryl forced himself onto him. But now that he was awake, they were already on the road. Could things get any worse than this?

“Father, must I live on? Why is life so difficult?” he muttered under his breath. Then the thought of the dream he’d had made him flinch. He glanced at Zigryl to make sure he wasn’t doing anything, then hung his head. Kay felt as though the man in front of him might shed his pants and jump onto him at any moment.

He wasn’t sure how long they’d been on the road, but about a day longer, and they would be in Edor. By then, he wouldn’t have to look this man in the face or even speak with him much. *I’ll be patient for a little while*, he told himself. Zigryl, who’d been studying Kay at length, laughed.

“Now you refuse to even look at me.”

“I’m sorry? N-no, that’s not...”

Kay gazed at him carefully, wondering what Zigryl was about to nitpick about next. He immediately directed his gaze downward, however, feeling a shiver the moment their eyes met. He was reminded of the events of last night, the way Zigryl would not stop no matter how much he begged.

Zigryl seemed to be lost in thought for a good while, then ran his hand through his hair.

“About yesterday... I’m very sorry. It wasn’t intentional.”

“*What?*” Kay found himself saying.

Not intentional? Did this man even know the meaning of “intentional?” Though there wasn’t much of the pain left now, the terror he’d experienced was still fresh on his mind. He’d felt an urge to kill this man multiple times. He’d remained silent and submitted, not having the ability or the station, but he could never like Zigryl. But now Zigryl was claiming that he hadn’t done it on purpose? Who had forced sex on Kay yesterday, if not Zigryl? Kay didn’t even want an apology from him, but it was not as shocking as hearing Zigryl say it hadn’t been voluntary. Kay scowled at him, and the duke laughed wryly.

“I really am sorry, I’ll have you know. I didn’t want to, either, but I couldn’t stop myself. At night, another man takes over me. I’m sure you’ll find it hard to believe, but it’s true. The scholars refer to it as a split personality,” he explained, laughing. Kay stared, at a loss for what to say. Zigryl continued, “As most people know, I was the son of a concubine.”

The son of a concubine. Kay hadn’t known this at all. He wasn’t the empress’s son? But then again, Kay couldn’t ever recall being told that Zigryl was a legitimate son of the imperial line.

“My father raped one of his attendants, and I was the result. When I was little, I was raised in a small palace, a country home outside the capital.”

Kay had no idea why Zigryl was telling him these things, but there was no way to stop him. Though everything said thus far was hardly anything special, the following words were nothing short of frightful.

“My mother was actually courting a noble at the time, and about to be married. The emperor ruined all that. And after she had me—an unwanted child out of an unwanted relationship—her mind couldn’t take the strain.”

“...”

“I think she must have believed me to be the cause of all her misfortunes. No—she probably resented the emperor, but I was the target of

her anger because he was in the capital. She abused me terribly, and I nearly died on multiple occasions. If the nursemaid who looked after me back then hadn’t cared for me on a nightly basis, I’d already be in my grave. Quite the cliché, isn’t it?”

Kay clammed up. If that had been his past, it wasn’t hard to understand the man’s twisted personality.

“And uh... Hmm. I think I was about seven years old. Starting to think for myself a little bit, you know? I think I must have decided I’d had enough of her abuse. I’d just started learning to use the sword then. She was my enemy, not my mother, and... I’m sure you’ve noticed, but it doesn’t take me long to decide to kill an enemy. The day I’d made the decision, I went to her room in the wee hours. It was quite dreary out, with fog filling the air.”

Kay found himself listening closely without realizing it. Zigryl laughed. “You’re wondering if I killed her, aren’t you? Let me start by telling you this. I didn’t manage to kill her. She was already dead, hanging from a bedpost.”

“...”

“I despised her, yes, but she was still my mother. It must have been quite a shock to me. Ever since then, I sometimes feel that I’m not quite myself—like another person is inside me. And that man is a bit... you know what he’s like. You’ve experienced him last night.”

Kay could understand the abusive background that attributed to his current personality, but it was frankly hard to believe that he had another identity inside him. At least on the outside, he didn’t seem much different from last night. And if Zigryl was telling the truth, Kay didn’t know what to think of the atrocities he’d suffered the previous night. Perhaps one could argue it had been a deal of sorts, but the violence had been too much—it had been rape, pure and simple.

Kay spoke to the man who’d just described his unfortunate past.

“You mean to say that none of what you did last night was done of your own free will? Is that... is that really true? Split personalities, and all that?” Kay clenched his hands, the fingers nervously entwined.

Zigryl smirked. Then he said in the most casual of tones, “No. Of course it’s a lie. My mother, a concubine? My older brother and I came from the same womb.

“I’m... I’m sorry?” Kay said, his head shooting up and his eyes widening. “That... that was a lie? All of it?” he shouted, his voice squeaking.

“Yes. Frankly, I didn’t think you’d believe me. Everyone knows that the former emperor had no concubines.” Kay realized he was right, but he couldn’t just comment tranquilly, *Oh, you’re right.*

He felt his head spin at the way Zigryl laughed at his credulousness, more than at the fact that he’d been lied to. All those things he’d just said in such a grave tone had been fake. What kind of man was this? And if he didn’t have such a past, why was he such a distorted person? Kay massaged the back of his neck, trying to combat his dizziness. Zigryl didn’t let up.

“Look at you. It’s a jungle out there, and you’re much too innocent to live in it. You know what? I’ll bet you’ll offer a house thief the contents of your safe if he explained he was trying to pay for his father’s medical expenses.”

Kay clamped his mouth shut and tried not to curse at him.

He’d known Zigryl was deranged, but he no longer even wanted to talk to this man anymore. The way Zigryl tutted pityingly made Kay feel a real killing impulse.

Kay turned his head away, not wanting anything more to do with him, when Zigryl said in a laughing tone, “Still, it’s true that I’m sorry.”

Sure you are. You expect me to believe that now?

“Forget it...” Kay said tiredly, lying back down. Zigryl grinned.

“Does it hurt? Are you trying to sleep?”

Kay nodded and closed his eyes as a gesture that he didn’t want to be bothered during his recovery. He felt a hot gaze on his face, but perhaps it was the mental fatigue—he was soon fast asleep.

* * *

The snow stopped when the sun began moving down toward the horizon. And before the day went completely dark, when the red setting sun drowned the snow in its shade, the snow coach jerked to a stop. Kay, jostled awake, raising his head. Zigryl, who’d been watching him, opened the window and shouted toward the front, “What’s going on?”

Schumann jumped down from his perch instead of speaking, walking through the snow and opening the door.

“The dark energy is too strong.”

Cold wind rushed into the coach. Kay had thought it cold enough inside the coach, but it was positively freezing outside. The snowfall had stopped, but the wind carried snowflakes. Kay, who wasn’t dressed for the winter, rubbed his arms and shivered. Zigryl glanced at him, then slammed the window shut. Schumann, flabbergasted to have it shut in his face, heard Zigryl’s voice coming through the tiny gap the duke made by ever so slightly opening it back.

“What does that mean?”

He was telling Schumann to talk through the window. This inhospitable treatment put Schumann at a brief loss, but he soon gathered his composure and said,

“The closer we get to Edor, the stronger the ghostly energy gets. You might not have felt it from inside the coach, but a less talented magician would struggle quite a bit if they decided to go further.”

Kay listened closely, then felt a foreboding.

“Ghostly energy? Why would there be such an energy in Edor?” Kay asked, opening the window further. Schumann glared.

“How should I know? I’ve never been there before.”

“Oh... right...”

Schumann was correct, of course, but his response was far too unfriendly for a simple mistaken question. Completely ignorant of the fact that one of Schumann’s expensive magical stones had been used to heal him, Kay decided to be silent, thinking both the master and vassal were equally unpleasant. Zigryl gave Kay a glance, then asked Schumann,

“So you mean this energy is centered around Edor?”

“The area is wide enough to make it difficult to say Edor is the center point, but the farther north we go, the stronger it gets. It’s close to the end of the continent, and energy naturally pools there, but I think someone did this intentionally. This malevolent energy definitely isn’t natural.”

Zigryl tapped on the windowsill, lost in thought.

“Can you guess who might be responsible?”

“No, not at the moment. It’s too widespread to say that it was targeted at us specifically.”

Zigryl nodded, then looked down at Schumann.

“So? What is your point?” Zigryl asked.

Schumann shrugged and answered, “I can’t go any further. This is a terrible environment for a magician.”

Kay jumped up in shock, only to hit his head against the roof and sink back to the floor.

“Ugh...”

The astonishment had jolted him into movement, and his already hurting head was now spinning. Zigryl laughed as if he found this cute.

“Are you trying to make me laugh on purpose?”

“No!”

Kay wanted to tell the man to shut up, but he knew better. He opened the window instead and asked Schumann, “Wh-what do you mean, you can’t go? Does that mean we’re going back to Lablen?”

“No. We need to reach Edor no matter what, Kay,” Zigryl said, making Kay gasp.

That doesn’t mean I have to travel alone with Zigryl, does it? Terrified, Kay spoke to Schumann, who was looking at him unsympathetically.

“You’re a magician?”

“How do you think I healed your mangled asshole in half a day?”

Kay inhaled sharply, feeling his ears go red. He’d wondered for a moment when he first woke up how he could be so relatively unhurt. That thought had soon slipped from his mind from the discomfort of being in the same space as Zigryl.

“Thank you... for that,” Kay said in a barely audible tone.

Zigryl sounded jealous as he said, “I’m the one who told him to heal you.”

“...”

Was he demanding thanks, too? Kay glanced at Zigryl, who had expectant eyes, and said, “Right... I see.” He really wanted nothing to do with this man.

Zigryl didn’t seem too happy about this but apparently thought better of saying anything further. He spoke to Schumann in a gruff tone, “So? What do you want? An additional five percent to your bonus?”

“No. This is a matter of life and death to a magician like myself, Your Highness,” Schumann said resolutely. Kay felt his heart sink. If they had to

travel by themselves, Kay knew he might not be able to resist sinking a knife into Zigryl's back at one point—though he would likely be dead if he tried.

Kay didn't want to die in such a way. Zigryl said, "Ten percent."

Schumann shook head sorrowfully. "It's not a matter of money, Your Highness." Kay gulped. If this was such a grave situation, money certainly couldn't motivate the man to continue.

"Fifteen percent. I can't go higher than that, Schumann," Zigryl said sharply. Kay wanted to ask him if he hadn't heard Schumann just now. Schumann looked up quickly, sounding grumpy.

"And a hundred gold extra on top of that. A barrier is a huge hassle to set up."

"All right. I'll give you two hundred. In return, I want you to cast a warming spell on the coach, too."

Schumann grinned as if this request hardly fazed him. Producing something from his pocket, he pressed it lightly into the side of the snow coach. Kay shuddered, feeling a mixture of relief that Schumann would be going with them after all, disgust at this master-vassal relationship that didn't seem to involve the slightest bit of loyalty, and a disconcerting sensation at Schumann's eerie smile.

Zigryl asked him, "Do you feel that cold?"

The snow coach soon began bouncing again along the snow.

"Yes, it's quite cold."

Though mostly I feel it in my heart. It was inside that he felt the brunt of it.

"Would you like me to hold you?" Zigryl said, reaching out subtly. Kay jumped, pushing back against the wall of the coach. Kay wasn't even able to speak, so shocked and frightened, and Zigryl smirked.

"All right. I'll hold you."

Zigryl began to approach, undoing his buttons. Kay balked and shouted,

"I didn't say that!"

"Huh? You can talk just fine, can't you?" Zigryl muttered, sounding disappointed. Kay avoided his gaze again, looking timid once more. He was worried that Zigryl might decide to accuse him of being rude to a grand duke. He didn't seem to be too far off the mark, since Zigryl was watching him with snake-like eyes. They were the eyes of an animal, unmistakably

wondering if he should feast on the prey in front of him or not. Kay bit back his saliva.

“Do you hate me that much? You seem a bit too disgusted. I’m no insect, am I?”

Kay told himself that insects would be preferable to this man’s company, but he was forced to murmur nervously, “No, that’s not it...” Zigryl looked him up and down, then gave a lazy smile. It was a very dangerous smile.

“Are you scared of me?”

Kay was, to be honest. He didn’t ever want to see this man again. He considered, unable to respond. When Zigryl repeated the question, he sighed.

“Uh, I’m sorry, but wouldn’t anyone feel that way after... what happened?”

“So you do hate me, then.”

Kind of stating the obvious, aren’t you? Kay began to think that he might die of frustration if Zigryl continued to ask such annoying and unnecessary questions. He even went so far as to say, “You could say that.” He shrank back again after he’d said it, looking up at Zigryl. As he’d expected, Zigryl was glaring at him softly.

“You hate me, huh?” came his low voice, and Kay got goosebumps. He wanted to clarify that it wasn’t exactly what he meant, but his lips refused to open. Zigryl got up, his upper body leaning forward, and glared viciously at Kay. Kay glanced surreptitiously toward Zigryl’s fist. An undoubtedly well-sharpened sword was hanging dangerously from his waist. Kay’s throat hurt suddenly, and he swallowed. The words *Please don’t do this to me* were on the tip of his tongue, but he forced himself to remain silent, knowing that he shouldn’t speak those words.

The beautiful man gazing down intimidatingly at Kay reached out his hand, and Kay gasped, falling backward onto the floor. He knew how silly he must look, but he was willing to bet all his worldly possessions that anyone would feel this way in the presence of this man.

“Hmm...”

Kay was considering grabbing onto Zigryl’s pants and assuring him that he didn’t in fact hate him, when Zigryl flopped back onto his seat. Kay looked up in surprise, his eyes full of tears, and Zigryl smirked.

“Well, all right. I’m not so sexually deprived that I’d bed someone who dislikes me.”

“I’m sorry?”

These weren’t exactly the words Kay would expect from a man who’d been raping him just a few hours ago. Zigryl grabbed him as he was reaching toward Zigryl’s pant legs, lifted him up, and placed him on his seat. Kay felt that his touch lingered for longer than necessary, but he didn’t complain other than giving a slight flinch. After both of them were seated again, Zigryl licked his lips and shrugged.

“I won’t touch you. So relax.”

“R-really?” Kay said, visibly brightening. He looked like a man who’d seen the light.

“If you like it that much, I’ll be tempted to tell you it’s a joke. But yes. I do mean it, Kay.”

It wasn’t natural for any man to force himself on another, but Zigryl spoke as if he was being generous. Kay was deeply relieved, wiping his sweaty palms on his sleeves. He could put up with this difficult journey, no matter how long it took, as long as he had Zigryl’s guarantee that he wouldn’t be raped again. Not that Kay trusted him, of course—but as he’d said, he wasn’t such a frustrated man.

He’d satisfied himself until just a few hours ago with Kay, so it didn’t seem likely that his reproductive organs would produce any more semen, at least not until they arrived in Edor. Zigryl’s eyes followed Kay’s hands as he wiped his sweat with a hopeful look on his face. Then he glanced out the window, which was still open.

“I feel... offended for some reason,” he muttered quietly.

“I’m sorry?” Kay asked. Zigryl simply waved him away and glared out at the darkening scenery, his face full of irritation.

* * *

Kay was supposed to be the guide, but all he seemed to do was sleep in the coach. The eminently capable Schumann had no trouble navigating on the right path, and by the time the forest had become completely dark, they arrived in a small cabin built for travelers between Edor and Lablen. It was

a shabby affair, with nothing but four walls and a roof, but it was quite the luxurious facility for someone traveling through a snow-covered forest.

Schumann piled up some firewood in the center of the square room and muttered a spell as he tossed in a cheap disposable stone. A fire blazed into being. Kay glanced at this, then placed the stew pot he'd prepared over the fire. It was a simple recipe consisting of some powder, water, dried vegetables, and dried meat, but at the same time, it was a meal just as luxurious for a traveler. Making it was a lot more work than just chewing on some dried food, but they couldn't simply have preserved meal three times a day when the grand duke was with them. While Kay stirred, Schumann began to place a barrier around the cabin.

He placed four of the same disposable stones down on the four corners and chanted a spell. He moved his finger, which had been dipped in a red liquid, about in the air, and there was an eerie sound as the stones released red smoke. Odd-colored balls of light spun around in the smoke. It was truly a magical sight. Zigryl watched him for a moment, then turned to Kay, who was stirring the stew. He narrowed his eyes and asked Kay, "Are there magicians in Lablen?"

"What? No. There are none."

How could there be a magician in the countryside? Lablen was too poor and too tiny a city for a magician to reside in. Inviting a magician to live in a region was very expensive, and Lablen was not equipped to pay such expenses. This was a question that didn't really take much thinking to figure out. Kay shook his head at the thought, and Zigryl asked another question.

"Was there ever one in the past?"

"No. Lablen doesn't need a magician, Zigryl—my lord."

Why was he asking such questions? Kay finally turned back to Zigryl and flinched. The man's purple eyes were narrowed at him.

"What is it?" Kay asked, slightly nervous. What was it this time? Zigryl gazed at the nervous Kay briefly, then smirked as though it were nothing serious.

"It's nothing. Most of the commoners are amazed when they see a magician plying their craft. You didn't seem all that interested."

Had Zigryl expected Kay to become starry-eyed like refugees from the wasteland across the continent? Magicians were usually found only in the

capital or the Academy, and therefore difficult to meet. A commoner with no reason to ever see one would probably not do so for the rest of their lives. And the sight of a spell being used was a rare sight indeed, which meant it wasn't surprising that Zigryl seemed suspicious about Kay's behavior.

"Ah... Haha. Well, I've never been an admirer of magicians."

Slightly taken aback by the unexpectedly sharp observation, he did his best to smile and go back to stirring the stew. He could feel Zigryl's stare on his back, but he didn't have the courage to look around again. He was quite used to lying, but he had a feeling that if he started doing so within sight of those snake-like eyes, he could end up without a tongue.

Schumann, in the meantime, had finished setting up the barrier and sighed tiredly as he sat by the fire. The fire crackled and released sparks into the air. Schumann was rubbing his shoulder with a discontented look on his face.

"What is it?" Zigryl asked, wondering what the reason was for the unpleasant look. Schumann tutted.

"It's strange. So strange. This is almost a graveyard... The ghostly energy is very sharp and aggressive. And..." Schumann paused, tapping his lap and appearing to think. "There's a very dark, nasty smell in the air. If this energy is coming from Edor, I think it's safe to assume that everyone there is already dead."

"What do you mean?" Kay said in surprise, his hand stopping as it churned the stew. Everyone was dead? How could that be? Schumann gestured dismissively, telling him to go back to the stew.

"It's just a guess for now, of course. But the odds are not good. I doubt any person capable of withstanding malignant energy of this magnitude would simply sit around in that remote village. Though if it's coming from further north, not Edor, then my assessment will have to change. It's a very slim possibility," Schumann added and shrugged.

Zigryl, who'd been studying the frozen Kay with a lazy eye, said, "Kay. When was the last time you communicated with Edor?"

"Well... I think it's been a little over two months," Kay stammered. He was able to say this off the top of his head because he'd been thinking about the very topic yesterday and found it strange. Someone had come from Edor every month, so why had there been no contact for a whole two months? It

occurred to him that some disaster might have befallen the village, like Schumann had said, but he soon shook his head, denying the thought.

Like Leon had said, it might not be anything of consequence at all. There was nothing especially shocking about two months spent without a word. Nothing had happened so far, so why would something have suddenly gone wrong now? The reasoning side of Kay's brain told him that Schumann was mistaken, but he'd felt a strange chill as soon as he mentioned that it had been over two months. Zigryl moistened his lips and muttered, as if confirming that Kay's premonition was correct.

"It wouldn't be surprising for something to have gone wrong in two months."

Kay gulped. Even though he thought the idea was absurd, a strange anxiety came over him.

"N-no. That can't be true. There are over fifty people living in that village," Kay said, as if wanting to convince himself that he was wrong.

It was unimaginable to think that all fifty of them were dead. If something *had* happened, Lablen would have received news. The worst calamity Kay could imagine would not result in the entire village being wiped out. How could so many people be killed at once?

Schumann waved at Kay, who was muttering vacantly, and told him nonchalantly that the stew would burn. Kay, who'd gone completely still, gulped air and looked around at the stew. The contents of the pot, which had been watery before, were now giving off a nice smell as it boiled. Kay stared blankly at the bubbles, filled some bowls with a trembling hand, and placed them in front of the two others.

Zigryl stared at Kay's thin, pale hands and asked, "What about the Alosha's Flowers? Do you think they'll be safe despite all this malignant energy?"

It was a ghostly power enough to make them think humans were dead. He was wondering if simple plants could withstand it. Kay, who'd been in a daze, turned around at Zigryl's question. He was flabbergasted the man was more concerned about some flower than an entire village that might have been wiped out. In fact, he hadn't said a thing about the villagers.

Kay suddenly realized that he was the only one who seemed interested in the villagers. That told him something about these two. *They're worse*

than scum. Schumann grinned, seemingly relieved and not at all concerned about the look Kay was giving him.

“Well... probably. As it happens, despite all the bad energy about the entire forest, most of the trees were healthy. All the wild animals have run away, but the plants don’t seem harmed. I would guess that it’s ineffective only against plants.”

Schumann rubbed his chin, explaining that though he would have to perform some analysis, the curse had likely been cast using a plant as a medium.

“The animals ran away?” Kay asked. Zigryl nodded.

“Hmm, I suppose animals are the most sensitive to energies like this. No wonder I only saw tracks at the entrance to the forest.”

Kay watched Zigryl, who sounded very knowledgeable about it all, with a disturbed look on his face. Maybe it was because Zigryl was something of an animal himself. Kay couldn’t help but be worried for the empire, seeing Zigryl smile at the news that the flowers were probably safe without a care in the world for the people who might have died. *That man could be the next emperor... What if our empire is doomed?*

Zigryl noticed Kay’s worried look and smiled at him.

“What? You seem scared. My goodness, Kay, you’re more of a coward than you look, aren’t you?”

Zigryl said playfully. Kay had no reason to deny it, so he nodded softly.

“What? Oh... uh... I guess I’m a little nervous.”

What if you ruin our empire? he thought to himself. Zigryl had no idea what he was thinking, of course, and stared at Kay for a moment before giving a shrug.

“It’s no fun if you admit it so easily.”

Zigryl irritably stirred the stew in front of him like he’d really lost interest. A brief silence fell between them. Kay watched the others cautiously, then put the pot down on the floor.

“So, does this mean any changes to our plans?”

Regardless of whether Schumann was right, this could be a more dangerous venture than expected. Kay was asking if they didn’t need to make any further preparations. Schumann ate his stew and said indifferently,

“Well, we don’t have any way to deal with it, at the moment. We’ll only find out once we get to Edor. However, we’ll pick up our pace tomorrow and try to arrive before sunset.”

“Shouldn’t we request backup?”

Kay asked gravely. Zigryl put down his spoon. The lazy smile on his face quickened Kay’s anxiety again.

“If the fifty private soldiers I sent disappeared in Edor...”

“That seems to be the most likely,” Schumann quickly said. Zigryl brushed some hair out of his face and nodded. Now Kay was really beginning to be concerned. Zigryl’s soldiers *had* vanished in this forest. Now he had the soldiers to think about, not just the villagers.

Wait a second... So that means...

Zigryl continued with a smile, as if clearing Kay’s convoluted thoughts.

“Right. Schumann is probably right. If fifty soldiers died in Edor, Kay, reinforcements will be pointless.”

“What? I don’t understand. Why would they be useless?”

Be that as it may, it seemed very clear that the three of them could accomplish very little there. He wasn’t requesting reinforcements when fifty soldiers might all have died in Edor? Was he determined to get them all killed?

Asking incredulous questions seemed to have become the norm for Kay ever since he’d met this man. Zigryl gave a phony smile, the way he always did.

“We have no idea what’s going on in Edor, of course, or what dangers await us there. But soldiers from Lablen will be little different from my own men, don’t you agree?”

“W-well, yes.”

He was right. The soldiers that could be sent to Edor from Lablen would number less than a hundred at best.

“We just need to get there quietly and harvest an Alosha’s Flower. Unless we have a large enough force to make us completely invulnerable, it’s probably best we move as a small group. That way, it’ll be easier to escape,” Zigryl said with a refreshing grin. Kay furrowed his brow.

“But that would really be too dangerous, wouldn’t it?”

Zigryl was being extremely optimistic, assuming that they could sneak in, get what they wanted, and get out. There was no knowing what threats

lurked there, but if it was anything like a monster ambush, Zigryl's tactic wouldn't be easy to pull off.

"And if there are monsters there, it's probably best that we have a larger party. Until we get to Edor, at the very least."

Zigryl smiled gently and looked Kay up and down at his protest.

"I know it's a stupid question to ask, but let me ask it anyway, Kay. When would that be?"

"Oh..."

If Kay went to request soldiers, and they traveled to Edor again after making their preparations, there would be a delay of at least three to four days. But even so, was Zigryl suggesting they head to Edor by themselves, knowing full well the dangers? The worried look on Kay's face seemed to make Zigryl very pleased.

"Don't worry too much. If things really get out of hand, we can throw Schumann to the monsters and make a run for it."

Schumann, who'd been eating his stew, glowered at his liege. Kay could imagine him thinking, *And you call yourself my liege?* Be that as it may, Zigryl seemed to think his idea was very original and laughed pleasantly to himself.

"Monsters will have different tastes from us humans. Maybe they'll fall in love with him at first sight. If one of them wants to marry him, I may have to officiate."

The joke was hardly something suitable for a grand duke to say.

"I think you'd be a better match for them, don't you think? It's just my personal opinion, but perhaps you share a common ancestry with them," Schumann said bitingly. Kay wholeheartedly agreed and nearly nodded at this. He had to hold his neck stiffly in order to keep himself from doing so.

"Are you insulting the imperial family?" Zigryl asked haughtily. Schumann shrugged.

"Of course not," he said.

"It's the monsters I'm insulting," he added in a barely audible voice, but Kay heard it all. Zigryl had also probably heard it. Schumann seemed extremely relaxed despite having said something that could easily have gotten him beheaded. Kay looked at him, wide-eyed with shock.

My god, that felt so good to hear! There was reverence in Kay's eyes. He could see himself liking this man, though Schumann probably hated

him. Zigryl licked his soft lips and smiled idly, however, without any indication of being offended.

“Come on, now. You’d gladly marry a monster if I offered you, say, a hundred gold in congratulations. Wouldn’t you?”

Kay thought this was absurd.

“That’s true,” Schumann said glibly. He even went on to ask if Zigryl would really give him the money.

Kay put down his spoon and stood. His appetite was gone, and his mind felt polluted. Wanting some air and sick of being in the same room with these men, he was about to head toward the door when he heard a noise from outside. It sounded like a faint scratching, but also like a human voice shouting for help. Kay turned to Zigryl and Schumann, who didn’t seem to have noticed.

“Didn’t someone ask for help just now?” he asked.

“What?”

Schumann asked, looking up. The dying voice came again, unmistakable this time. Could it be one of the missing villagers? If it was, they might be able to find out something about Edor. And even if it wasn’t, they could at least help a wounded man.

“No, Kay!”

Schumann shouted urgently, but Kay had already opened the door. The moment he did so, the magical stones forming the barrier exploded, giving off black smoke. This told Kay that something wasn’t quite right. There was a vicious gust of wind, followed by a thick stench. Kay looked around at Schumann in shock, but before he could see the look on Schumann’s face, a cold hand gripped his shoulders.

“What the—oh god!”

Something bit into his shoulder with crushing force. Kay screamed, terrified and in pain, and fell onto his bottom. He looked up at his assailant, whom he’d supposed was human at first. Looking from below, however, he could tell immediately that this wasn’t the case. He saw blue, frozen skin that looked as though it had been painted, and a contorted face that had dark red spots where the flesh had rotted away. A mouth with white muscle fibers and yellow teeth showing was greedily chewing on a piece of Kay’s skin, blood trickling down its chin. Red eyes glowed behind the creature as a terrible chomping noise filled the air.

They were growling.

Kay screamed again.

They were zombies, and it wasn't just one—there was an entire horde.

"My goodness, how foolish of you. Do you need to be told that individuals with a taste for human flesh shouldn't be allowed near your body?"

Zigryl tutted, getting up and drawing his sword.

* * *

Kay backed away, his hand on his shoulder, and the zombie that had been chewing on his flesh at the door rushed at him. He shut his eyes as the nasty stench filled his nostrils. A cold air rushed up to his face. *This is the end!*

Kay held his breath, realizing the moment of his death had come. There was a strange crunching noise as hot liquid splattered over him. When Kay opened his eyes, the zombie, its disgusting flesh exposed, was trembling with a sword through its forehead and backing off. Zigryl stepped aside and pulled the sword right back out. Kay wiped the liquid from his face, which was watery, rotten blood. Zigryl dragged him backward before he could even throw up from disgust. Kicking the zombies who were trying to get inside, he quickly shut the door.

"Schumann, can you set up another barrier?"

"If the door can last us just five minutes."

Schumann quickly tossed magical stones, attaching them to the four walls. He was quite deft, considering that physical activity wasn't one of his strong suits. Zigryl slotted his sword above the door handle, fixing it in place, and a noisy hammering began. The wooden door cracked down the middle, as if it would break at any second. Kay shivered at the strange moaning sounds and the eerie scratching. The noises mixed with Schumann's chanting.

Zigryl, who didn't seem all that surprised even by the sight of a group of zombies, came over to Kay and patted his cheek.

"Kay? Kay. Pick yourself up. Are you upset I pulled you away from that thing? You'll hurt yourself if you frolic with creatures like that," Zigryl

joked, grinning. The sly smile brought Kay to his senses a little, and he blinked.

“Z-Zigryl. My lord.”

His shock wearing off, he felt like he could cry. Who knew this man could seem so trustworthy and helpful? The human mind could be so disingenuous. Kay had been sick of him, sickened by him, three minutes ago, but now felt so happy to see him. Kay was quite good with the sword himself, and this was the first time he’d been attacked by a monster without even being able to retaliate. This was also his first time seeing so many monsters at once. If it hadn’t been for Zigryl, he would have been dead. Zigryl smiled confidently as he watched Kay’s emotion-filled eyes.

“Amazing, aren’t I?” he said.

“I... beg your pardon?” Kay asked, wondering if he’d misheard. Instead of repeating himself, Zigryl simply gave a slightly slicker smile. The crafty grin made Kay blush like a tomato as he realized that he had indeed thought Zigryl to be amazing for a brief moment. Perhaps he’d taken leave of his senses temporarily at the prospect of death. Zigryl stared into Kay’s face, red from confusion, and smirked.

“You’re so strange, you know that? You always say you hate it, but the way you act and the look on your face suggests you’re trying to seduce me.”

As usual, Zigryl’s words made no sense. But Kay was unable to refute the statement beyond giving a scowl, so bewildered was he by the emotion he’d felt moments ago. Kay wavered and averted his gaze, and Zigryl watched him as if he was cute. With a playful smile, he inspected Kay’s shoulder, tearing away the ragged fabric around the wound and sucking his teeth.

“The skin’s a bit torn, but the wound isn’t deep, thankfully. The muscles are fine, so even if it hurts, you should be able to move just fine. I’ll still have to tell Schumann since it’ll leave a scar if it’s not treated properly.”

“I can live with a scar,” Kay said.

A couple of scars on a man’s body were no big deal. Zigryl shook his head languidly, sprinkling some white powder to stop the bleeding.

“I can’t.”

There was a stinging sensation as the powder came into contact with the wound. Sweat beaded on his brow. Kay bit back a moan, and Zigryl gently

wrapped a bandage around the shoulder. He was being very kind, despite having put Kay's life in dire danger last night. Feeling rather dazed but grateful, Kay said, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have—"

Zigryl beamed at him and cut him off.

"I know. Of course you should be sorry. You destroyed the barrier Schumann went to the trouble of setting up and put all of us in danger. We can discuss how you'll make up for this grievance later."

Adding that he wasn't saying this because he wanted sex, Zigryl laughed arrogantly. Kay's gratitude evaporated like snow sprinkled into a furnace. *I should have known.*

"..."

This was his mistake, and in a hierarchical relationship such as this, punishments were a matter of course. But Kay felt somewhat indignant all the same. When he turned, he found Schumann glaring at the door, his eyes bloodshot. At that moment, the door that had been rattling precariously broke apart with a loud noise.

"Tsk."

Schumann's tutting revealed that his attempt to set up another barrier had failed. Hungry-eyed zombies began to tumble in through the door. The moment the first zombie set foot inside, Kay lunged forward before anyone else. He couldn't use his left arm very well, of course, but he couldn't die like this. Even if he survived, Zigryl could kill him later—if not through the sex, perhaps by giving him high blood pressure—but he didn't want to become a zombie.

Kay's sword cut through the arm of the zombie that had just come in, leaving a long gash, and also cut the arm of another one right behind it. The zombie jumped at Kay despite its wound, and Kay shoved his sword into the creature's chest before kicking it away.

"You fight well," came Zigryl's relaxed voice from behind. Schumann was trying to catch his breath, staring out the window and muttering,

"Those infernal creatures have devoured our horses."

The coach was in shambles as well. Despite the two sounding relaxed, Kay felt cold sweat trickling down his cheek. He could only use one arm, which meant he had to back away when two or more of the zombies attacked him at once. Another zombie he'd cut dashed at him, so he buried his blade in its neck before taking a step back. After the zombie collapsed,

others rushed in to take its place. Aiming a spare dagger at the creatures that poured into the cabin, Kay backed away into a corner.

The battle was beginning in earnest. Schumann muttered quiet spells without end, and shards of sharp ice that formed at his fingertips sunk into the zombies' eyes. Zigryl was lazily moving about in the middle of it all.

"I shouldn't have sent so many. What a bother," he said.

Glowing pellets Schumann had scattered on the ground exploded when the zombies stepped on them, and bits of blue flesh and rotten blood flew everywhere.

Kay spat as a piece splattered against his lip, cursing and turning to Zigryl.

"Don't tell me these are your private soldiers?"

"After all the training I gave them, they're leaving their swords hanging from their waists and pushing their mouths in our faces, the idiots. Who else would they be?"

He smiled wickedly as he pulled out one of those swords and buried it deep in a zombie's chest. Kay gaped in despair. Even if there was a magician with them, they were three against fifty. While Kay shoved back a zombie which tried to bite his shoulder, one without legs gripped Kay's own. The decayed fingers dug into Kay's ankles.

"Ugh!"

Using the dagger on his injured left side, he buried the weapon in the creature's head. He could clearly feel the blade sinking past the skull. His shoulder reverberated with pain, and he was instantly drenched in cold sweat. The zombie refused to die, attacking again even with a dagger in its head, and another jumped at his back, which was wide open. Kay groaned at the impact as he was sent sprawling on the floor.

The zombie screeched, and the feel of its cold breath on the back of his neck gave him goosebumps. Flailing about, Kay looked up and locked eyes with Zigryl, who narrowed his eyes and smiled vividly. Kay could see the expectation in those purple eyes.

"Zig—"

In that briefest of moments, Kay was forced to make a choice between being eaten and being saved by Zigryl. He felt a passing sense of misery at the fact that those were his only options, but the words soon burst out of his mouth like a scream.

“Zigryl!”

The moment the zombie’s teeth dug into his neck, Zigryl’s sword sliced the zombie’s face. The force of the attack sent Kay flying toward the wall as well. There was a resounding crash that shook the wooden building.

The zombie snarled and growled.

Kay struggled to catch his breath, scraping away the foul lips and teeth buried in his skin. The impact had caused his forehead to bleed, but the fact that he was alive mattered more. He felt shivers all over his body at the smell of his own blood. Zigryl stopped in front of Kay, who was seated on the ground, and looked down at him. Kay gasped, taken aback by the haughty smile on his face.

“This time you would have died for certain if I hadn’t saved you. Isn’t that right?”

Zigryl was right. What was more, Kay had called out to Zigryl fully aware that the consequences could be just as bad as dying to a zombie. Kay stared at the ground anxiously, and Zigryl reached out his hand. Kay looked up, surprised at the touch, but averted his gaze again before their eyes could meet. Zigryl’s warm thumb gently traced Kay’s lips.

Surprisingly enough, Kay could feel his body relax a little from the shock of the zombie’s cold lips. Zigryl might be worse than some wizened old pervert, but at least he was no zombie.

Zigryl moved his hand away, licking his chops as if disappointed. Given his personality, he’d probably wanted to push his finger all the way in and move it around.

“Well, all right. I’ll leave this on the tab.”

Kay stared at Zigryl with his eyes wide since he’d been very nervous about what the man might say next. Zigryl was grinning, his eyes full of lust.

“But don’t forget, Kay. I saved your life. That means...”

Zigryl said, maintaining eye contact as if delivering a very important message. He stopped short and glanced behind him, his fair cheek now showing a slight scratch. A zombie had kicked a piece of wood, grazing his skin. A frightening chill descended on the cabin all of a sudden.

“Kay! Get back!”

Schumann shouted from the distance. Kay instantly did as he was told but had to stop and look back upon hearing a shattering sound that was

accompanied by a murderous air. Cold wind buffeted them mercilessly. Half of a cabin wall was missing. It seemed Zigryl had thrown one of the zombies right through the wall.

He hadn’t even made a single haughty comment, but a baleful energy biting as a freezing gust seemed to exude from him. His golden hair fluttered in all directions. A simple glance was enough to show how deranged he was. His eyes were glowing with a lurid light. Fear coursed down Kay’s spine, and he felt his body freeze.

“Kay! Back off if you want to live!”

Kay might have asked why that was the case, since they were on the same side, but instinct drove him to quickly retreat and stand beside Schumann. That man was more dangerous than any zombie. Kay knew this in his gut.

When Zigryl threw his head up, his unfocused eyes were smiling prettily. He looked like a drug addict. The breath coming from his gently curving red lips hung in the air. Kay stiffened at the sound of his cackling laughter and grabbed Schumann’s clothing.

“Wh-why’s he like that?”

“Must I really tell you myself that my liege is off his rocker?”

What in the world is that? Kay gasped. Zigryl was cutting down everything in sight, be it zombies or wooden planks. In fact, “cutting” was too moderate a word. He was smashing everything to bits with his weapon. Zombie flesh and bone shattered and flew in all directions. Zigryl didn’t even seem aware of what he was doing, since he sliced into skulls and difficult-to-cut locations like the pelvis. He also deftly cleft backbones in two. The zombies were being crushed, diced, and minced like the ingredients for a sausage, and it was enough to almost make Kay pity them. When there were less than ten zombies capable of movement within the cabin, Schumann turned to Kay, who was still rooted to the spot.

“Well, then... I’m going to go and secure an exit.”

Kay’s head shot up.

“L-let me go with you...”

Schumann shook his head, noticing that Kay’s shoulder and forehead were bleeding.

“As for you, Kay... Please bring His Highness.”

“What!” Kay said, gasping. *What do you even expect me to do?* Schumann said nothing more, glancing at him apologetically before running out through the zombies.

“You can knock him out first if necessary. Now then, good luck!”

“Hey, wait—hey!”

Kay was about to run after Schumann, who was leaving him with an impossible mission, but his aching ankle stopped him in his tracks. He felt that it was extremely unjust and lamentable that his ankle was in its current condition. He probably wouldn’t feel so desperate even when a woman he loved was leaving him.

Knock him out if necessary? Kay turned, his neck shivering, toward the back where extremely loud noises could be heard. The red zombie blood looked grotesque on that beautiful, pale face. Zigryl grabbed a zombie’s head in his hand, then crushed it with a repulsive noise. *That was a head, not some copper kettle...* Kay scowled as though that had been his head, not a zombie’s, and shook his own.

This was simply not possible. He didn’t even dare go near the man. It would be more preferable to render a zombie unconscious and take it with him instead. He looked out the door, where Schumann was pushing the rest of the zombies toward the cabin and clearing a path.

“...”

Kay hesitated for a moment. It was impracticable, clearly, to take Zigryl with him. Schumann probably hadn’t believed it could be done as he abandoned Kay. And Kay felt no loyalty to this man or any urge to stay with him. The more he thought about it, the clearer the answer seemed. He decided to run away instead of going to Zigryl. *Whatever. I’m sure this will work out in the end.* At moments like this, a *que sera sera* mindset was what was needed.

Kay, who glanced one more time toward Zigryl before he left, suddenly realized that Zigryl was gone.

“Where did he—”

He gasped as he tried to look around. Zigryl was right in front of him, raising a giant sword in order to attack him. Zigryl couldn’t tell friend from foe at the moment. How many times had he realized he might die today? It didn’t even occur to him to move out of the way. Dazed, he looked at the sword approaching him. *What a shitty way to die. If I’d known I’d die like*

this, I would have just run away yesterday. At least that would have given me a chance to take my own life!

The sword was flying close to his face now. He had the impression that Zigryl's eyes had just met his.

"Ka...Kay?" came a shaky voice from the man's red lips.

Kay felt the cold steel on his forehead, and two narrow streams of blood trickled down on either side of the cut. Zigryl, holding the sword in front of him, seemed puzzled to see Kay.

A strange moan escaped Kay's throat.

Am I dead? Kay felt the spot where the sword had come into contact with his forehead with shaky hands. They were not actually touching, though they were very close. It seemed a vicious wind generated by the swing had cut his skin. Realizing he was still alive, he swore inside and passed out.

As Kay's legs gave out and he fell face-first, Zigryl snatched him out of the air. He blinked, watching vacantly as the blood from Kay's forehead dribbled down his pale neck and drenched the collar. He could tell for certain that he'd swung his sword again. Having lived with his temper all his life, he knew how he reacted to injuries.

Sometimes he lost control for half a day, sometimes for days on end. He would only come to his senses when his surroundings were a ruin and there was nothing to cut, improving his mood somewhat. He wasn't completely unconscious during it all, so he did remember what he did. In fact, he even knew what or who he was attacking with each blow. Never having felt that any creature or object was too valuable to destroy, he simply hadn't cared. *So why did I stop now?*

Zigryl still looked shell-shocked as he stared at Kay in his arms. He could still remember the amber eyes he'd noticed right before the swing was about to land. Licking his dry lips, he muttered,

"Something's not right..."

The tips of his fingers ached, and his heart seemed to beat faster than usual. He wanted to force Kay's eyes open so he could see them again. He'd been so angry that he wanted to cut down anything and everything, but fleeting eye contact had been enough to make him feel as though something sharp had scored his heart. This was something he'd never experienced before.

“Kay! You’ve held out for long enough! Just abandon His Highness!”

Schumann called from somewhere. It seemed he was far enough away from the cabin not to be able to see what was going on inside. Zigryl looked about and realized that the mindless zombies were hesitating around him. Their instinctive drive to tear into any living creature seemed stymied by this monster of a man.

Zigryl swung his sword wide, casting off the blood covering it. Then he lightly slung Kay over his shoulder. *Why is my heart beating so fast?* The fact that his anger had subsided suddenly was extremely strange.

Schumann, who’d been standing at a distance chanting a spell, turned around as Zigryl walked out from among the zombies. The light from the cabin was behind Zigryl’s back, and it was otherwise dark out. Schumann was forced to stare for a good while before finally saying in an incredulous voice,

“You...Your Highness? Wh-why are you coming out so quickly? Did you destroy everything inside already? It hasn’t even been ten minutes.” An anxious Schumann backed away slowly, then narrowed his eyes.

“Huh? Kay? Did you kill him?”

He looked at Kay’s limp body, resting on Zigryl’s shoulder, and sucked his teeth. *Poor man. He was unlucky enough to run into the duke, and now he’s died an unfortunate death after all the torture he’s been through.* The man had died two days after they’d met. It seemed he simply wasn’t suited to their party.

“You should have left the body in there,” Schumann said crudely. Sympathy was only a passing thought in his head. Zigryl watched him quietly.

“Something’s off, Schumann.”

“What do you mean? You mean something’s wrong with you?”

Schumann tilted his head, thinking that the grand duke had always been wrong in the head. Zigryl frowned as he stared deeply into Schumann’s eyes. He realized that no matter how long he stared into them, nothing close to what had happened earlier with Kay was happening. *What was that?* he wondered.

Zigryl considered for a moment, then spoke slowly.

“I think... I must have caught a cold.”

“Ha! You? A cold?” Schumann said, as if the idea was absurd. “Do you even know what a cold is?” The magician continued, looking quite offended. Now that he’d noticed that the zombies around him were not even attacking, it seemed to be on the tip of his tongue to say that Zigryl should stop pretending to be human. Zigryl said to the scowling Schumann,

“I swung my sword to cut Kay, but I couldn’t. That was probably because I had a cold, right?”

Schumann’s eyes went wide.

“You couldn’t cut him?”

“No. I tried to, I’m sure of it, but my body stopped before I realized it.”

Schumann groaned quietly at Zigryl’s confirmation.

“Well, that’s... that’s intriguing, to be sure. I wouldn’t attribute that to a cold, though.”

That was not a symptom that could be linked to a cold. However, Schumann still asked if Zigryl felt any discomfort, to which Zigryl replied, “I don’t know for sure.” Schumann hadn’t been expecting Zigryl to say yes anyway, so he immediately nodded.

“So why couldn’t you cut him?”

Zigryl took a moment to think, then moistened his lips. Thinking of the moment seemed to make his heart beat faster again.

“We locked eyes, and my heart raced. It felt exciting, like sex.”

“So... you made eye contact, and the thrill of it prevented you from hitting him?” Schumann said. “That sounds a lot like a man in love,” he added in a mutter before shaking his head. That made no sense.

Zigryl watched him quietly, then gave a slow smile, running his hand down the inside of Kay’s thigh. It wasn’t clear what he was thinking, exactly. The sky was filled with gray clouds, and the moon was peeking out, scattering a chill blue light. His beautiful lips muttered in amusement, letting out a white breath that hung in the air.

“Love, huh?”

OceanofPDF.com

ACT 3.
The Arel Mansion

“Ugh...”

Kay let out a hot breath, his body shaking slightly. His entire body felt hot, but his chest seemed to be on fire. With an effort, he opened his eyes to slits and realized that his vision was spinning. He noticed golden hair in front of him. Lacking the energy to even be surprised, he muttered quietly,

“Lord Zigryl?”

“Oh, you’re awake?”

“Yes...” Kay said weakly. He was about to bury his face in the pillow again when he looked up, shocked by a cold breeze on his cheek. *Where the hell am I now?* He raised his head, and a dizzy spell washed over him. That feeling was accompanied by a painful burning sensation in his head, shoulder, and ankle. He found himself moaning in pain, unable to hold it back. In his indistinct vision, he noticed the back of the handsome Zigryl’s head, as well as a white forest that swayed beyond it. That was when he realized why his body seemed to be oscillating. He was on Zigryl’s back. The realization made his head ache even harder.

“Does it hurt that much?” Zigryl asked. Kay gritted his teeth, fighting the pain.

“Excuse me—let me down.”

He tried to hold his head up, a hand to his forehead, and he noticed Zigryl’s muscular neck. It was damp with Kay’s sweat. Kay thought he could smell a scent coming from his body—the same one that he’d noticed while in Zigryl’s arms last night. How long had he been on the man’s back? If they’d walked since last night, that had to be at least half a day.

“Why?” Zigryl said, sounding genuinely puzzled. Kay was flabbergasted. Even if he’d been forced to join this party against his will, he wasn’t so crude as to be ignorant of the fact that it wasn’t acceptable to be riding in a coach one day, and on the grand duke’s back the next. Licking his chapped lips, Kay tried to be as polite as possible.

“I can walk now.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt that,” Zigryl said, snickering. The pretty, mirthful eyes were an unfamiliar sight when viewed from behind. “But if I let you walk a little, you might collapse again.”

Zigryl berated him lightly, asking why the vice captain of the guard of the House of Lablen was so weak. Kay recalled the times he’d lost consciousness in the last two days. The first had been from the violent sex, and the second when faced with a sword that moved faster than the eye could blink. Though this man was saying that Kay must not train at all and that he couldn’t even touch Kay at this rate since he passed out at the slightest excuse, it seemed to Kay that the vast majority of the fault lay with Zigryl, who was flashing a crafty smile. Perhaps a tiny smidgen of blame that remained could be directed toward Kay’s frailty.

Kay stared at the golden hair swaying in the wind and sighed quietly as he realized that he wasn’t sure he could kill Zigryl, even from up so close. Zigryl claimed that Kay presented him with a conundrum every time he blacked out, where the duke was left to ponder whether this was Kay’s way of asking Zigryl to lie with him then and there. Kay could no longer put up with him and spoke in the most courteous and careful tone he could muster.

“I appreciate the sentiment, but I can probably walk now. Please let me down, Zigryl, my lord.”

Kay was starting to feel he’d had enough of Zigryl’s hands lewdly running down his buttocks and the inside of his thighs. At this rate, he wouldn’t have been surprised if the hands pushed their way into his pants. Zigryl’s promise not to jump Kay didn’t seem to apply to his insistent touch, since he seemed to feel no qualms about it at all. Zigryl appeared not to be set on arguing, taking away his hands and letting Kay down easily. Kay felt the wind blow past his sweaty clothes now that he was separated from Zigryl’s back. The moment his feet touched the snowy ground, a sudden fit of dizziness washed over him, making him almost lose his footing.

“See?” Zigryl said playfully, grabbing Kay’s arm. Kay was suddenly sweating, and he knew he would have fallen if Zigryl hadn’t supported him. He still had a fever, that was for certain. He stood up, holding Zigryl’s hand, and the pain slowly subsided. The icy gusts began to numb his earlobes.

“You could have just stayed on his back. Think of him like an ox or a horse,” Schumann said, slowly walking forward from the rear. Kay hadn’t

heard him behind them at all. Kay smiled faintly, shaking his head.

“It’s all right. I just need a moment.”

His ankle and shoulder were bandaged with clean cloth. He ran his hand over his forehead, which was also covered with a sweaty bandage. Though it hurt to do so, he could still walk. Zigryl watched Kay like he was a child learning his steps, then dusted off his wrinkled clothes.

“You’ll get some healing spells administered to you when we get to Edor. Just bear it for a little while.”

Kay heard Schumann grumbling that it was his spell, not Zigryl’s.

“Are we... really going to Edor? Shouldn’t we go back to Lablen and request backup after all?” Kay asked cautiously, recalling that it had been difficult for him to even kill a couple of zombies on his own. The zombies might not be a threat to Zigryl and Schumann, but Kay didn’t like the idea that yesterday’s attack could be repeated. If the forest was infested with zombies, then Edor was completely unapproachable by now.

Zigryl, who’d been walking through the snow while avoiding the trees, glanced at Kay with an arrogant smile.

“You seem to be under the impression that you were asleep for half a day.”

“I... beg your pardon?”

He walked a little further, then seemed to spot something. He smiled and gestured for Kay to approach.

“Come over here, Kay.”

Kay did as he was asked, a confused look on his face. He noticed white smoke coming from some trees. The forest rounded off into a clearing with some small houses.

“It’s been two days since you fell unconscious, Kay. Look, it’s Edor.”

Kay’s mouth fell wide open.

He turned to Zigryl, unable to speak.

“You only came to just about when we reached Edor. It almost made me think you were pretending to be unconscious on purpose so you could stay on my back for longer.”

Kay clammed up as Zigryl commented that the timing had been quite something. Even if he denied it, it was true that he’d been on Zigryl’s back for most of the way, anyway. Kay was unable to speak and red in the face.

As if wanting to mock him a little more, Zigryl leaned an arm on his shoulder and sighed.

“My shoulders hurt because I carried you for two days. Schumann suggested we leave you for dead, but I refused.”

“...”

Kay glanced at Schumann, who was walking toward Edor and pretending not to have heard. He wouldn’t be surprised if the man really had suggested it. He turned to Zigryl, who was smiling lazily and massaging his own shoulders as if in pain. He was about to thank Zigryl, but the grand duke grinned and said something that shut him right up.

“If I’d done as Schumann asked, you’d have become a zombie. Not that pretty zombies like you are common, of course.”

He explained that the sight might have made for some wild charm in its own right and licked his lips, apparently picturing something. Kay watched him with a tired look in his eyes. Kay lamented the fact he’d come to so early. This wasn’t perfect timing—in fact, it was imperfect, despairing him. How nice it would have been if he’d only woken up after they’d completely arrived in Edor, or after they were back in Lablen with everything over! Zigryl watched his gloomy face closely, a smile on his face. The wind blew, carrying powdered snow on it, scattering his shining hair.

“Kay?”

“Yes?” Kay replied, avoiding the persistent gaze. Cold sweat broke out on his back despite the cold. Troublesome things always happened when the man looked at him in this way. Kay could already sense him smiling craftily above his head.

“I hope two days of sleep haven’t left you bereft of your memories. I saved your life, remember?”

Kay did his best to smile. Of course he hadn’t forgotten, though he did want to claim that the shock to his head had caused him to lose that particular memory.

Seeing Kay unable to answer and doing his best to pretend his frown was actually a smile, Zigryl curved his lips dismissively.

“Well, I don’t mind if you forget. I can simply throw you back in among the zombies if you do. So you don’t remember, then?” he said, muttering under his breath and deftly pulling out his sword. The blade was black with dried zombie blood. Kay quickly said,

“I remember. Of course I remember.”

Even if he’d really forgotten, the only thing to say at the moment was that he remembered.

“Is that right?”

Zigryl almost seemed disappointed as he sheathed his sword, and Kay felt somewhat indignant. It wasn’t fair he was lording it over Kay like this when he’d endangered Kay’s life more often than he’d saved it. Kay was starting to understand, however, that the man would simply say he could rescue Kay more times to even the score, so he kept his silence. The resentment seemed to show on Kay’s face, however. Zigryl placed his hands on Kay’s frost-nipped cheeks and pulled his face close.

“Well, that’s no way to look at your savior.”

“Well... I just remembered. I forgot my cigarettes.”

Kay’s eyes automatically drew aside now that Zigryl had his head in a firm grip. He stared at Zigryl’s cheek, unable to look the man in the eye, and noticed that the smooth skin was slightly frost-chafed. How could this man threaten people with a pretty face like this? Kay felt stifled every time he mentioned saving Kay’s life. Maybe he should have just died.

Kay felt a hankering for tobacco now that he’d mentioned it and rummaged about in his pockets. Zigryl gently slid his hands to Kay’s numb earlobes. Kay resented the touch, but it was warm, nonetheless.

“I’m sure they’ve got tobacco in Edor. What are you worried about?”

“Huh?” Kay said, all his tension leaving him suddenly.

He was wondering if the grand duke was suggesting they rifle the corpses when Schumann shouted from afar, “Your Highness! Hurry! That’s the Arel mansion!”

Schumann, who’d gone ahead, seemed to have asked for directions. There were children and an old man standing around him. Kay’s eyes widened as he took in what he saw.

“Those are... people?”

They were, and there were more than one. He realized the houses were fine, and nobody seemed dead. Things seemed no different from two years ago, when he’d last visited the village—it was a cozy evening village scene. The white smoke seemed to be coming from cooking fires.

“Wh-why are they alive?”

There was malevolent energy everywhere, and zombies were plaguing the forest nearby. Why had nothing changed in Edor? Kay looked to Zigryl in confusion, and he cocked his head.

“What? Are you disappointed to find them alive?”

“Y-you know that’s not what I meant!” Kay shot back. Zigryl snickered.

“If they’re not dead, it means we can get our business done more quickly. It’s a good thing.”

“W-well, yes, but...”

Schumann, who’d insisted that everyone in Edor must be dead no matter how many times Kay denied the possibility, was standing too far away for Kay to ask.

“If it’ll please you, I can kill all of them for you,” Zigryl said with a warlike smile, massaging the bare skin of Kay’s neck and shoulders. Assuring Kay that he was more than willing to do that for Kay’s sake, he patted his sheath.

“Please don’t say things like that, even as a joke,” Kay said, pushing Zigryl’s hand away and walking toward Edor, where Schumann was gesturing them to come. He knew it was a joke, but he also knew that the man was more than capable of carrying out his threat. It gave him the chills.

Zigryl was licking his lips, watching Kay from behind as he walked through the snow and brush to approach the village. His intense smile suggested he wanted to lick Kay’s behind, not his own lips.

“You think I was joking? Quite dense, aren’t we?” he muttered.

* * *

As Kay walked down the approach to Edor with Zigryl behind him, he could see people looking at him from among the worn streets. The snow had been shoveled neatly aside. There were about ten or so houses on each side of the street, at the end of which was a mansion that presumably belonged to Baron Arel. The village seemed completely normal.

The moment he set foot onto the street, however, he felt as though a cold hand had suddenly grazed the back of his neck. He flinched and looked around wildly, noticing that darkness had suddenly descended on the village, the sunset nowhere to be seen. The cozy village was gone, replaced by a complete ruin that suddenly filled his vision.

The villagers who'd been looking at Kay curiously had empty sockets for eyes. They were so pale as to be blue, and their fingers wrinkled like all the blood had been sucked from them as they pointed at Kay. He felt a chill —the air entering his nose was frosty and biting.

The terror of the scene was incomparable to what he'd felt after seeing the zombies at the cabin, and Kay backed away, all the hairs on his body standing on end. His heart beat so quickly his head hurt. These were not people or undead monsters—his gut told him they were not of the mortal plane.

As a heady terror pressed down on Kay, a chill that he couldn't stand washed over him. His legs stiffened and swayed, refusing to cooperate with his need to back away like they'd been stung with poison. A high-pitched noise that sounded like the screeching of metal, or perhaps a woman's scream, pierced his ears.

"Ah..."

He felt as though all the darkness in the village was attacking him at once. Villagers who had empty sockets for eyes were walking about in the rippling dark as though nothing were wrong. They were laughing as they conversed, entering their homes, or looking at Kay. Schumann was the only human as he stood among them, his face somewhat blurry.

"Kay?" came a voice, but Kay's tongue refused to move. He was covered with cold sweat. He backed away, quivering with fear, and one of the things that had been beside Schumann tilted its head and slowly approached Kay. Its black, rotten lips formed a smile, and a red tongue trailed out, dangling down to the creature's chest. The black eye sockets seemed to widen the closer the creature came. Something was squirming inside it. Kay wanted to run away, but his feet seemed glued in place.

"Oh no... Ugh..."

The blue fingers reached out toward Kay's shaking shoulder. Something dark resembling smoke billowed out of the gaping black opening, almost as if it would swallow Kay up. Right before the hand touched his shoulder, something snatched up Kay's wrist. It was Zigryl's hand.

"What's the matter? Are you cold?"

Kay felt the breath he'd been holding escape him all at once. The world seemed to spin around him once, then brightened again as if it had never

been dark. Where the otherworldly being had been standing in front of him was a young woman, looking at him worriedly.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

Kay inhaled sharply like he’d been suffocating, his knees giving way. Zigryl stood behind and allowed Kay to lean against him. Kay breathed hard, feeling the warmth on his back, as he slowly took stock of his surroundings again. The village scenery was back, just as he’d seen it from afar. Ten or so people were all looking at him worriedly. Zigryl gripped him tightly as if to soothe him, then whispered in a light tone,

“Kay, you look like you’ve seen a ghost. Or is it because you’re unwell?”

Zigryl’s tone was low, but a little bit slow. The tone of his voice wasn’t heavy, however, and Kay found it oddly comforting.

Perhaps it was because the hallucination had faded the moment the man had touched him.

He gripped Zigryl’s clothing tightly as he tried to catch his breath, apparently forgetful of the fact that he’d despised the man’s touch. Everything was back to normal, but the chilling sensation and the memory of what he’d seen was still in his head.

“I... I think I must be seeing things.”

“Seeing things?”

Zigryl repeated, his eyes traveling to his clothes, which Kay was holding on to. The quivering hands were gripping the clothing like a lifeline. The purple eyes were smiling pleasantly as they traveled lasciviously over his neck, but Kay was so out of sorts that he couldn’t even feel offended.

He could see Schumann approaching from the distance.

“Is something the matter?”

Kay gave a faint smile, his face completely drained of blood. He was starting to feel a little embarrassed, with even Schumann seeming worried about him. The terror was still upon him, but he couldn’t stand here trembling like this when the entire village was staring at him. He wasn’t some frail young lady. Though he tried to look composed, his lips refused to stop twitching. He clasped his unsteady hands together and tried to apologize, but Schumann tutted knowingly.

“Oh, you don’t have to say a word. Hell’s energy is too much for an ordinary person to handle.”

Kay ran his hands down the goosebumps on his arms. *Hell?*

Zigryl narrowed his eyes, seeming quite disappointed that Kay had let go of him. He turned to Schumann and asked, “What does that mean?”

Schumann smiled at the villagers, assuring them they could go about their business and subtly suggesting that the three of them wanted to be left alone. Then he turned to face Kay and Zigryl.

“Well, there are all these villagers around. Why don’t we talk on the way to the mansion? It’s not so much a secret, but I don’t think we’d want the villagers hearing it, anyway,” Schumann said casually. Then he took the lead.

“Kay, you saw a strange version of this place, didn’t you?”

“Oh... yes.”

Kay had never considered himself to be a coward, but just now he’d nearly had a heart attack. Schumann nodded.

“I think I can guess what sort of hallucination you saw. You remember how I said that everyone in Edor was likely dead?”

Of course Kay remembered. The first moment he’d caught sight of the village, he’d wondered why Schumann had claimed such an absurd thing. Schumann laughed arrogantly, as if knowing what he was thinking.

“Judging from the evil aura filling this place, your hallucination should be the true state of the village. I’m sure you can’t feel it, but even now the malevolent energy is all around us. It’ll probably make you feel very cold.”

“Wh-what... I don’t understand...”

What did he mean, the hallucination should be the true state? This was a cozy village filled with friendly people. Kay couldn’t picture it at all.

“Do you mean to say something is protecting it or stopping the energy?” Zigryl asked. Schumann shook his head, his expression frosty and dark.

“No. The evil energy isn’t being stopped. It’s simply leaving the village be. What could this tiny remote village have to defend against such an evil aura? Even if it did, and the village was actually safe, Kay should not have seen what he did.”

“Then why...” Kay said nervously. Schumann barked a laugh, his smile suggesting that hope was meaningless.

“These impatient creatures would never slow down except for one reason.”

“Ah, I see,” Zigryl said behind him. This time a really cold gust blew through Kay’s hair, making him feel as though his ears would freeze right off. Perhaps it was the cold, or Schumann’s words, but Kay felt his shoulders tense.

“They are expecting to see something far worse than even this—a true hell on earth.”

Kay gulped, and the entire mansion, covered with wizened ivy and snow, came into view. The three-story building looked drier and bleaker than expected, perhaps because of what Schumann had just told him. The climbing vines seemed about to cover the windows as well.

“I’m a magician, and His Highness is full of life and vigorous stamina, so neither of us are susceptible to energies like this. But I *am* worried about you, Kay, seeing as how they came at you as soon as you came in.”

Schumann glanced at Zigryl, commenting that Kay seemed to become an easy target for the nasty creatures.

“I don’t want to have to say this, but I suggest you stay with His Highness at all times, if possible. That will help with the hallucinations and the chills, though it can’t be helped if you’d rather have the hallucinations,” said Schumann when something at the edge of the mansion suddenly caught Kay’s eye.

“Ah...”

A boy was standing at the far window of the third floor. The skin was as pallid as the snow around the window, but most noticeable were the eyes, which had pupils so large that the whites were almost obscured completely. Their eyes met for a moment, and the black eyes that appeared and disappeared as the boy blinked continued to gaze right at Kay and the others. The boy’s bloodless and blue lips moved as if trying to say something. Kay guessed it might be something along the lines of, *Go back.*

“What is it, Kay? Are you seeing things again?”

Kay jumped as a hand thumped him. He found Zigryl frowning at him. He almost looked a little troubled, which was unusual for Zigryl.

“W-well, there’s a person over there...”

“What? Where?”

Kay pointed to the window and looked around, but the window was empty and firmly closed, as if it had never been opened in the first place.

Ivy still covered it, which meant the window couldn't have ever been open while Kay watched.

"..."

Suddenly, he felt so tired that he could say nothing even as Zigryl commented, "Well, it looks like I'll have to stay by your side no matter what."

* * *

"It is truly an honor, Your Highness."

Kay stood behind Zigryl, watching the obsequious man. He kept on parroting that he was honored at every turn, and it was enough to make Kay sick. The baron was obese and looked to be in his fifties or sixties. He was definitely a homely man. In fact, he was so unsightly that he made Kay call off his earlier thought that he'd prefer an old, ugly pervert. Zigryl looked the baron up and down as if he felt a killing impulse. The man was breathing hard, sweaty and red in the face as he continued to pile on the flattery.

Schumann stepped forward, perhaps noticing Zigryl's discomfort—that is, murderous impulse—and spoke to the baroness, who was standing next to her husband.

"My goodness. Your husband seems to be sweating quite a bit. I have the perfect remedy. Will you not take him to a room?"

Schumann couldn't have Zigryl producing his sword again. They needed help from the House of Arel.

The baron bowed again, repeating that this was a great honor, and the baroness stood tall beside him, giving her husband a scathing look. She seemed to know why Schumann had made the suggestion.

In contrast to the ugly and ungainly baron, the wife was extremely thin—though it was probably just from her personality, rather than lack of good nutrition. The grand duke and his party had appeared without warning, which meant she must have had no time to prepare. And yet there was not a single wrinkle in her dress, and she looked perfectly composed. Her straight back and raised chin created a haughty impression.

Her skin was still smooth and her eyes sharp, suggesting that she must have been quite beautiful in her youth. But a scowl appeared on her face

whenever she looked at her husband, and it ruined any potential for beauty. She'd probably frowned disdainfully at her husband over a decade, lamenting her choice of spouse.

"But His Highness is here with us. I'm not sure if that would be proper..."

Zigryl smiled lazily. It was hard to read his face, but he was probably not thinking of anything particularly kind.

"His Highness will understand. Let's go."

The baron had no idea that his life was at risk if he stayed any longer—etiquette was not the concern here. The man was tactless, to boot.

The baron's eldest son, who'd been beside him, also pushed the baron along.

"I think that's a great idea, Father. You haven't been feeling well lately. You need some rest."

The words were kind enough, but the tone was sharp. The eldest son, who was probably about thirty, resembled his mother to a tee, in terms of everything including his appearance and the way he looked at his father. The baron didn't seem to care about his wife's behavior, but looked put out by the disdainful look from his son.

"Well, all right, then..."

"F-father, let me help you."

A son who had the same figure as the baron gripped the frail, middle-aged man's shoulders. He was probably the third son, looking to be about twenty-five or six. The baron would probably look like him if he lost the cowardly look. The young man's plump, smooth, and innocent face was quite cute. Kay felt a little refreshed after watching the baron, the baroness, and the eldest son.

"That's not necessary, is it? You should stay and hear what His Highness has to say..."

The baron seemed more fatherly when he spoke to his third son, compared to the way he'd fawned at Zigryl. The son was also affectionate and kind. He seemed to think he couldn't send his father away like this, persecuted by his mother and older brother. He shook his head at his father and bowed apologetically toward Zigryl.

"I ask for your forgiveness, Your Highness; please allow me to go with my father."

Zigryl waved as if to tell him to hurry away, seeming uninterested.

“Do as you please.”

“Thank you, Your Highness.”

Kay glanced at the young man as he bowed and helped his father out. He didn’t like the baron, but he did think the father and son together were a pleasant sight. As they were about to leave the room, there was a knock on the door. The door opened quietly, and a woman came inside.

“Oh, this is my daughter, Your Highness,” said the baroness, visibly brightening. The expectant look of joy and pride on her face was palpable. The girl bowed, her fancy attire suggesting she’d adorned herself before coming in. Absurdly enough, she was dressed as if for a ball. Her clothes were slightly outdated and old, but they were clean and well-maintained, as if they’d been stored away with much care. It was easy to tell why she’d taken such care, even if it meant showing up late. *It really was easy, but...*

Kay shook his head, pitying the baroness for wanting to marry her daughter to a man like Zigryl. He truly could understand how charming Zigryl’s looks, wealth, and power could seem, but there was more to a person than that. This seemingly flawless man had a few lethal—literally lethal—drawbacks.

Though they were many in number, the first one to mention was his mental state. Anyone who spent five minutes with him would understand. Kay feared he might dream of how Zigryl looked while cutting down the zombies—eyes deranged, his smile maniacal. This man had no morals, ethics, or conscience. Kay had seen plenty of arrogant nobles, but none as cruel and nasty as him, however.

And any woman, no matter how experienced, would scream at the sight of his penis, much less a noblewoman with a frail constitution. If he had good manners in bed, that could have been a redeeming trait, but he was a beast in the sheets and perverted besides—his request for Kay to cry was a case in point. Kay was a man in his prime, and even he had nearly died. And the list went on.

Reminded of the sex with him and feeling a chill down his spine, Kay was looking at Zigryl, who wasn’t even facing in the young woman’s direction as he raised his cup of tea when Kay suddenly realized that the woman’s long, dark hair seemed familiar.

“I’m sorry for being so late, Your Highness.”

He’d heard that elegant voice before. He couldn’t take his eyes off her as she slowly raised her head. The woman’s face was pale, her eyes brown and slightly drooping. Her lips were a little too red from the rouge, and there was a small beauty spot above it. It had been extremely sexy, the way she’d screamed in bed and how that beauty spot had sunk between the wrinkles that formed on her cheeks. The moment he saw her face, the memory came right back.

Kay’s jaw dropped.

“Helena?”

* * *

Schumann, who’d been about to leave, openly ran his eyes over the woman’s body. She was quite a beauty. The dress was slightly old-fashioned, but the curves of her body that showed through the fabric were enchanting. She’d have looked even more refined and sensuous if it hadn’t been for her excessive makeup. Her shy expression also seemed too forced. Making one’s intentions too obvious could end up only reducing one’s charm.

Of course, it would have been strange for a young noble virgin in this remote village to not be entranced by a man of Zigryl’s station. Schumann had seen so many women of this sort that he was no longer impressed. They probably believed that becoming Zigryl’s forty-fourth mistress was probably better than ending up the second wife of some fat, ugly baron in the countryside. Not that Zigryl had so many mistresses. That was a thought only someone who knew nothing about him could have, but that was beside the point.

Schumann knew how many women snuck into Zigryl’s room at night, even when he showed no interest. It was hard not to know, since it had always been his job to get rid of the women clinging to his bed the next morning. Some were actually incapable of leaving on their own after the previous night, but not all. There had never been a case like Kay, who’d required actual treatment.

Zigryl was a picky man, but not when it came to sex. In that regard, he was an omnivore.

Schumann muttered to himself that another woman was about to ruin her life when Kay said the woman's name. Schumann stopped, noticing the temperature of the room drop several degrees.

"So it seems you know each other," came Zigryl's lazy voice, a bit lower than before. Kay seemed to have noticed, too, since he was pale and sweaty. It was obvious he was trying to figure out what had upset Zigryl this time. Schumann felt for him. Though he'd known Zigryl for twenty years, sometimes, he still had trouble reading the man's intentions—and that one just now had been completely inexplicable. What had set off his delicate temper this time?

"Oh, well..." Kay said, looking troubled. The woman named Helena quickly said,

"I knew him two years ago. He was a friend, back when I went to study in Lablen. It's very nice to see you again, Kay."

It wasn't clear what their relationship had been in the past, but her contorted face was enough of an indication that they hadn't just been friends. Kay looked at her calmly, albeit with visible distress. When he nodded and said, "Indeed, Lady Helena," however, her gaze wavered violently. It would probably have seemed less emotional for her to openly say that they'd been lovers in the past. Perhaps Kay really thought of her as a friend, but it was clear that she had truly loved him and hadn't been able to forget him.

Zigryl's eyes traveled over her body inquisitively. He smiled gently with his shapely lips, then leaned back in his chair.

"A beautiful woman. All right. You say you're Kay's friend?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

Helena bowed quietly, her face red. Her balled fists were pale and quivering. Schumann glanced over at Kay, who looked concerned, but not by the tears almost visible in Helena's eyes. He seemed more worried by the fact that something seemed to be the matter with Zigryl.

Schumann had received a similar feeling on the evening of the day they'd first met, listening in from outside the door. Kay looked like a neat-looking young man, but an ordinary one. It seemed the women begged to differ, however. It was odd, considering there seemed to be many women who were unable to forget him, even though he could be rather inattentive at times. His liege, Zigryl, was flashing a murderous smile at Helena, and

Schumann had a feeling that he also found Kay to be special. *Don't tell me he's going to be jealous?*

Schumann led the baron and his son out, since they'd paused to stare after Schumann stopped in his tracks. Unfortunately for Kay, things did not look good. From the look on Zigryl's face, he wouldn't be surprised if the grand duke reached for his sword. He hoped Zigryl would keep things under control, at least until they could find Alosha's Flowers, but that was little more than just a wish.

* * *

Kay didn't know how to react. Zigryl was looking at him as if he was a cheating wife.

"Wh-what's the matter?"

Zigryl watched him at length, and Kay gulped nervously. He lowered his gaze, having a feeling that the man was about to say something absurd again. The man said casually to the top of Kay's head,

"It's nothing."

Zigryl's expression suggested that this was *not* nothing, however. Knowing how impossible to understand he was, Kay hid a sigh of relief and turned his head. Then he locked eyes with Helena, who was looking at him. Kay was forced to turn his eyes away again at the pitiful look in her eyes. Why was she looking at him like that, when she'd been the one to ask for the breakup? Their relationship hadn't even been that deep. She'd been lonely living alone in Lablen, and Kay had always had a soft spot for lonely women. They sometimes met for sex, and that was all.

She always told him after the deed that she was a noble, and because she was going to marry a noble of higher station than herself, she could not be Kay's lover for long. And Kay understood it all. He knew that reaching a higher social status was almost an obsession with her, and he wanted from the bottom of his heart for her to marry some high-ranked noble. He also believed that, in the end, who she married was none of his concern. All he did was lie with her whenever she needed company.

While he hadn't known that she was the only daughter of the House of Arel in Edor, her fixation wasn't hard to comprehend—it probably came from living with her mother.

Kay wanted to talk her out of it since she'd chosen Zigryl, of all people, but he was willing to help her to the best of his ability should she truly wish to be married to this grand duke. Not that there was much he could do, since he was always on the defensive himself.

Things were only getting worse. After avoiding the eyes of Zigryl and Helena, he now found that her brother and mother were looking at him. The baroness's eyes were filled with disdain and rage. Though Helena had bowed her head, her expression had still given away the fact that they'd been more than friends. Kay scratched his cheek, and realizing that things were fast getting out of hand, smiled cautiously.

"I-if you'll excuse me, I need to use the restroom."

He could feel Zigryl spinning around to glare at him, but he rushed out of the room, anyway. If he stood there any longer, Helena would likely burst into tears. He noticed a man who appeared to be a butler standing outside the room with an aproned woman.

"Where is the restroom?"

"There's one inside the room."

"I'd rather use one on a different floor. I'm a little shy."

Kay found himself saying this without any effort—maybe Zigryl's brazen attitude had rubbed off on him. The butler wisely said no more, telling him the location of the toilet on the next floor, and Kay climbed up to the third floor.

The stairs, covered with red carpet, were strangely quiet. He was sure there must be only a few servants in the mansion. Maybe the two standing at the door were all of them. The house was a bit too big for just two servants to handle, but it might be doable if there were only five people to care for. Kay suddenly remembered Helena mentioning how few servants there were at her house, and that her family did the light chores themselves.

As he stepped onto the final stair and turned, a boy was standing in the corner. It was the same boy he'd seen at the window earlier. He seemed to be about twenty years old, perhaps too old to be called a boy. He was pale, but definitely human.

Kay was a little confused. The boy didn't seem out of place at all, despite his sudden appearance. In fact, his presence seemed so faint, he might as well have been a piece of furniture. Kay hadn't been mistaken earlier, after all. He studied the boy carefully, as if to make sure that he

really was human. The white pajamas he wore were nothing special, but they weren't made of cheap fabric. This was not a servant. *Is he the youngest son, then?* The baroness had seemed to despise her husband. Had she really had four children with him?

The boy blinked a couple of times, then immediately turned away.

"Uh, excuse me," Kay said, reaching out to stop him. As soon as the boy rounded the corner, however, someone grabbed him from behind.

"Kay."

"What—Lady Helena?"

Kay said, looking at her guiltily. Tears came to her eyes as soon as he said her name.

"You look like you've been well," she said resentfully, and Kay gulped. He looked shabby, with bandages everywhere, but she didn't even seem to notice. What was she doing here? He'd left the room to avoid her, and he had no idea why she'd followed him. If she was to marry Zigryl—the sort of man she'd always wanted—she had nothing to gain from making her past apparent like this.

"You as well, Lady Helena. You're... just as beautiful as ever."

In fact, she seemed even more beautiful than he remembered her being. Noticing his casual tone, her eyes brimmed with tears to the point they seemed ready to trickle down her cheeks at any moment. Kay pulled her by the hand around a corner, making sure she was standing opposite the railing so that nobody could see her from below.

"Why are you out here? You probably don't want to be out here alone with me..." he said, meaning to go back inside. She covered her face with both hands.

"I... I missed you."

A sob escaped the pale, delicate hands, and Kay sighed toward the ceiling. She wasn't this kind of woman. What was wrong with her? She'd always been haughty and confident. Seeing her cry like this, completely oblivious to the situation, frustrated him.

"Don't cry, Helena. Please don't."

She looked ready to wail, and he grasped her cheeks cautiously, wiping her tears. Her gray eyes turned to him again, resentful.

"I'll speak with the grand duke. Not that it's likely to do much—but I'll still tell him how attractive a woman you are. I'm sure he..."

The tears dripped from her eyes.

“You’re still so...” she mumbled tearfully. Kay smiled wryly. He had a feeling he knew what she wanted to say.

“Don’t cry, Helena. You’ll ruin your makeup. Look how beautiful you are...”

He ran his thumbs over her smudged lips, pitying her for her tears. *Should I just kiss her? Maybe I should.* An impulse came over him. He had a soft spot for lonely women, but even more so for women in tears. Whenever women cried and clung to him, he felt as though he should accept them.

Their eyes met, and her gaze wavered briefly. Then she closed her eyes. Kay licked her lips, and the moment she opened them, he softly slid his tongue inside. Her lips were soft and warm. Shockingly enough, the sensation reminded him of Zigryl. Though the night had been forced, he’d wondered then if he should just continue to kiss the man. Despite the violent, cruel sex, the kiss had been quite good. Maybe it was because Zigryl was a man. It had felt rough, and the pull of his breath had been soft but powerful. He was lost in thought when someone grabbed him by the hair.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

The sharp pain in his scalp made Kay jump. He looked around and had another shock. A huge man was standing right behind him, even though he hadn’t heard anyone approach. It was Zigryl. Helena gave a short scream and took a couple of steps backward. How long had he been there? Seeing his surprise, Zigryl smiled and let go of his hair.

“Z-Zigryl.”

“Ah, yes. I came to look for you, since you were taking so long. I was worried you might have fainted again.”

His tone was cheerful and playful, but the eyes were ice cold. Zigryl looked ready to twist Kay’s neck. *What’s the matter with him? What’s going on?* No matter how much he tried to figure it out, Kay couldn’t guess the reason for Zigryl’s black mood. Not that he’d done a very wise thing in kissing Helena, but she wasn’t Zigryl’s woman or anything. Kay looked up at him anxiously.

“You said you were going to the restroom. This is the restroom, I take it?”

Zigryl ran his hand through his hair and looked around. Noticing the sluggish movement, Kay asked cautiously, “Z-Zigryl? My lord?”

He was checking if Zigryl had lost hold of his senses again. Zigryl smiled, taking a step toward Kay and cocking his head.

“So, did you relieve yourself? Does it feel good?”

The question seemed ordinary enough, but Kay suddenly had the feeling that something was very wrong. He took a step back, and Zigryl grabbed his shoulders lightly.

“You should answer my question, Kay.”

Was it the lights behind Zigryl? His eyes almost seemed red. Hardly able to breathe, Kay looked behind him. Helena was watching them uneasily.

“Lady Helena? Please head down first.”

Zigryl gave a dry laugh, then narrowed his eyes toward Kay as if amused. She hesitated, staring at Kay.

“Please go,” he said. He wasn’t sure why he had to go this far, but he moved slightly aside, toward the stairs, effectively standing between Zigryl and the spot she would have to pass. Helena looked puzzled, but she did as she was told and ran down the stairs. Zigryl watched her coldly, then put a hand on Kay’s cheek with a smile.

“Isn’t that cute? Did you want to protect that woman? I thought you said you were just friends. Goodness me.”

“...”

He hadn’t really been trying to protect her, but he tended to treat women courteously by instinct. He did this even at moments when it occurred to him that it wasn’t really necessary. His heart beat apprehensively as Zigryl approached him. He’d forgotten briefly about how frightening this man was, after the encounters with zombies and ghost-like apparitions—he was far more scary than a zombie. Kay was extremely tense.

“But why... why are you angry?”

“What?” Zigryl asked, looking slightly taken aback. He then watched Kay silently for a moment, blinking with his pretty eyes and grinning.

“What do you mean, I’m angry?”

Your eyes are practically burning, you know... Kay couldn’t bring himself to tell this grinning man to his face that he was obviously extremely

upset. Instead, he bowed his head. It frustrated him greatly not to be able to say what he wanted.

“Well, if you aren’t angry, then I’m relieved.”

He turned toward the stairs to walk away when Zigryl stopped him.

“What about you?”

“I’m sorry?” Kay said, smiling uncomfortably. He felt an impulse to run. Zigryl ran a hand over Kay’s twitching cheek and nudged some hair aside, asking softly,

“I asked you if you’d relieved yourself. Have you?”

“No... not yet. I was on my way to the restroom. I’m in a bit of a hurry. Will you let me go, please?” Kay said pathetically. Zigryl pushed Kay up against the wall. Zigryl believed he was being gentle, but Kay slammed against the standing structure with such force he gasped violently. The grand duke smiled and said in a venomous whisper, “I thought you said this was the restroom? Where do you think you’re going?”

Kay wanted to say he’d never said such a thing, but he had to shut his mouth and fight for breath as a hand gripped him by the collar. He tried to push his way out, but to no avail. No matter how hard he tried to pull his wrists away, they wouldn’t budge. The difference in strength was absurd.

“No? Were you lying, then? That you’re just friends, and that you were going to the restroom? Ha! Don’t tell me that you were?”

Zigryl’s lips touched Kay’s ear, his breath tickling the sensitive organ as he asked if Kay was lying. The intent was very clear, and it left Kay flabbergasted.

“L-let me go, my lord.”

“Don’t tremble. You’re just taking a piss. Why are you so scared?”

“You said...”

You said you wouldn’t touch me! It hadn’t even been three days since then. Could this man be any more shameless? Kay gritted his teeth and glowered at Zigryl. He couldn’t raise his voice, since Helena could be listening from below, but he couldn’t just stand still and let Zigryl have his way again. Zigryl licked his lips and smiled.

“That’s a misunderstanding. I’m just... helping you relieve yourself, Kay.”

Kay could not understand why he was offering to do such a thing for a fully grown man in the middle of a corridor. Kay wasn’t a two-year-old.

“I don’t need you to help—” Kay mumbled, but a hand pushed its way into his pants. The hot hand grabbed his privates without hesitation. Kay felt a combination of disgust and pleasure as Zigryl’s coarse palm touched his penis. Kay tried to use his other hand to pull the hand away, but Zigryl barked a laugh.

“Oh, all right. You’re shy, no?”

He easily spun Kay around. Kay felt a chill, realizing the back of his neck was exposed. Zigryl grabbed both of Kay’s arms and pinned them behind his back, breathing hard as he pushed his leg in between Kay’s thighs. Kay could feel the man’s erection through the soft skin of his thighs.

“It’s all right. Don’t be scared,” Zigryl said in a low, soothing voice. His tone was saturated with desire. The realization that this man was aroused again was so hateful that Kay wanted to cry.

“Z-Zigryl, Your Highness. Please let me go.”

He felt like a helpless child. No matter how much he struggled, it was no use. The chills coursing through him, along with the sense of helplessness, made him shudder. The man whispered subtly into his ear,

“Poor Kay. Don’t you cry. It’s time for you to answer nature’s call. Can I lick your neck, by the way?”

“No,” Kay said immediately. He could hear Zigryl snickering. He seemed to find Kay hilarious—or perhaps cute—and Kay shivered.

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t want you to—ugh!”

His pants and underwear had already been pulled down partway. Zigryl deftly ran his palm over Kay’s glans, and he felt forced pleasure run through him.

“Are you sure?”

Kay wanted to reaffirm his denial, but the soft touch running along his urethra and fondling his testicles prevented him from speaking—if he had, he would have moaned out loud.

“It’s fine, right?” the man whispered. Kay shook his head as hard as he could, but Zigryl wasn’t one for body language. A warm tongue touched Kay’s earlobe. Zigryl’s lips and tongue trailed around his ear, Kay’s weak spot, which Zigryl seemed already aware of.

“Go on, Kay, come for me,” Zigryl whispered, sucking Kay’s ear.

Kay bit his lip so he wouldn’t moan, and Zigryl’s hand continued to stroke Kay’s penis quickly. Fingernails grazed his glans, blurring his vision. The sound of his ear and neck being slurped passed noisily over his red cheeks. The skilled touches and kissing pushed Kay toward orgasm by force. Though he did his best to hold it in, it was no use. His wrists ached where Zigryl was gripping it.

“Ugh!”

He bit his lip so hard it turned white, but the moan escaped him, anyway. His entire body shivered, followed by a wave of relief. His knees buckled, causing him to bang his head against the wall. Zigryl, who’d been sucking Kay’s neck forcefully, gave a low laugh. He didn’t let go until the last bits of semen had oozed out. Then he released Kay’s arm.

Kay slid to the carpet, but his body ached so much from the pleasure that he didn’t even feel any pain in his knees. His eyes felt hot. Breathing hard, he looked up at Zigryl with half-open eyes. Zigryl was smiling as he licked the semen off his palm.

“How... how can you do this to me?”

This was just too much. There needed to be a minimum degree of trust between two human beings. Kay could have simply dismissed Zigryl as not worthy of being called a fellow human being, but the past few days of travel had perhaps caused him to feel a slight modicum of hope.

A wave of betrayal and indignation washed over him. What had happened last time had already happened—what had he done to deserve it this time? Zigryl hadn’t forcibly entered him, but that ejaculation had been plenty unpleasant. He felt so ashamed and irritated, he felt like he could cry.

Zigryl smiled pleasantly.

“Are you angry?”

“Forget it...”

Was he serious? Kay felt like an herbivore thrown into a jungle. He was so frustrated that he’d been born weaker than this Zigryl. Zigryl, on the other hand, seemed to have gotten over his anger. His smile looked refreshed. What had he been so upset over in the first place? Could it have been Helena? *No way.*

Kay studied Zigryl closely again. Zigryl ran his hand through his hair, smiling placatingly as he said, “Take your time and come back down when you’re ready. Oh, and all the rooms on the third floor are for guests. You

can have your pick of rooms if you're tired." He then casually went down the stairs. Kay watched the handsome man's backside carefully. That man didn't like Helena, by any chance, did he? But the look in his eyes had been very similar to those of a jealous woman.

"No. It can't be."

Kay shook his head. There was no way that man could feel that way. Jealousy was too human an emotion for him. *To think I'm thinking like this after being disappointed moments ago for his inhuman behavior!* Kay couldn't seem to take his eyes off Zigryl until he vanished, however.

* * *

Having had his way with Kay and turned around, he wiped the apologetic smile from his face and turned coldly to the corner of the stairway. A lamp on the opposite side cast a long shadow over the carpet. The cringing shadow was trembling, as if in tears. Zigryl's smile grew a little more unpleasant as he hummed and drew his sword. He plunged it into the corner of the wall at an angle. He soon heard someone sink to the floor. Helena's purple dress was visible around the corner. Zigryl pressed down on it with his foot. His arm moved effortlessly, dragging the blade with it through the wall. He stopped when the blade was a little lower than his waist.

"So, was it fun to spectate?" he whispered quietly and sweetly, like a demon. It simply wasn't the kind of voice one would expect from a man who was gripping his sword as if ready to behead the seated Helena on the spot. A repressed scream and quiet sobs escaped her clamped lips. She couldn't believe what she'd just seen, what he'd done to Kay.

"Was it no fun? Well, I suppose I hardly did anything this time."

Zigryl grinned and rounded the corner. Helena was glaring at the blade poking out through the wall, her face devoid of blood.

He'd stroked Kay's penis with the full knowledge that Helena was watching from below. In fact, it was likely that he'd done it on purpose. Helena glowered at him as the tears fell, speaking with a shivering chin.

"You sick bastard! How could you do that to another man... To Kay?"

Zigryl shrugged. He seldom responded to raw criticisms of this sort. *So you think I'm sick. What are you going to do about it?* he seemed to be

saying.

“Stay away from Kay. Don’t torture him. You... you have no right...”

Helena didn’t stop speaking even as she trembled. Though her tone shook like a lamb’s from the fear of speaking thus to a grand duke, her eyes seemed to be on fire. Zigryl grazed the side of her head with the blade he’d pulled out of the wall.

“What a brash young lady. You need to be taught your place. Oh, but you can keep on blathering if you wish. You know what they say, people will give up their lives for the ones they love. Wouldn’t you?” he asked, smiling. The sword, which had been trailing down the wall, was touching her neck. Warnings like this didn’t fit Zigryl’s style, but the woman’s outrage filled him with a strange elation, and he’d delayed killing her for the time being.

This was different from sexual desire, but nonetheless enjoyable. He’d never felt the urge to tear apart another human being as strong as this. He slowly squatted on the floor, whispering cruelly to the terrified Helena.

“What do you think will happen if I command Kay to kill you? What do you think that man you clung to would do? Tell me, young lady.”

Her gaze wavered violently, and he smiled. He knew enough of Kay’s practical and somewhat indifferent nature. Kay would complain, but he would produce his sword in the end. The woman cried, her lips blue. Perhaps she was aware of it, too.

“Kill me now if that’s what you want, you trash.”

He smiled kindly at her and shrugged.

“Kill you? Why would I do that? I could mess your face up a little, though, so you can’t bear to look at Kay’s face ever again. Though I suppose you might be motivated to off yourself at that point.”

He stroked her cheek. There was an odd frostiness to his laughing eyes that told her he meant what he said. She clammed up in the end, despite her earlier bravado.

“You’d better choose wisely who you talk to like that. Don’t be an idiot.”

The blade that had hovered near her neck instantly moved alongside her head. Her long, luscious locks dropped to the floor, severed.

“The next time we meet, I won’t be cutting just your hair. You understand me?”

he said, sheathing his sword and grinning at her. He saw Schumann walking toward him from the other end of the corridor. When he stood up and turned away, she burst into tears.

* * *

Kay, who'd been gathering his composure and shaking his head, as if trying to empty his thoughts, suddenly groaned. He noticed that his aching wrists were red and swollen. He pushed on it softly, and tears came to his eyes.

"Ow, damn it... That impossible man..."

The sight of his wrists filled him with the irritation that had been drowned out by his sense of helplessness. What had he done to deserve this? He'd encountered a man he could neither resist nor refuse. He'd expected to have at least two days completely to himself once they got to Edor.

He didn't have the courage to traverse the Forest of the Dead, which might still have zombies in it, but he also hated Zigryl. That meant the only option was to kill Zigryl or die himself. Some careful thought made it obvious he wouldn't be able to kill a man who'd done this to his wrists merely by pinning them down.

He sighed deeply. It was either he die, or submit to the humiliation. In the end, his life mattered more to him than anything else. Though there were many moments when he preferred death, he could no longer ask to be killed now that his life had actually been threatened several times.

It would only take three or four days to find Alosha's Flower or whatever and return to Lablen. He only needed to be a little more patient.

"Let's just wait four days. Four days. Four... If we can just find that flower..."

He reiterated to himself that he would wait, even if it meant using absolutely all the reserves of patience he had in him. If he survived the dangers of emotional damage and the threat posed by that deranged man, he could go back to his old life. That thought made him feel as though four days wasn't much time at all. Maybe it would only be three days if they could manage to find the flower quickly. Though of course, whether that absurd plant really existed was another matter entirely.

The first day of their trip, as the stifling ride in the snow coach had begun, Kay had been unable to bear the silence and asked Zigryl a question.

“So... What is this thing that you’re looking for in Edor?”

He’d felt the need to say something since Zigryl had been looking at him without a word. Zigryl ran his hand through his hair and asked with a slightly arrogant expression, *“Why? You curious?”*

He wasn’t, not really, but Kay nodded, deciding he needed to know what he was doing this for, at least. Zigryl smiled, his eyes curving beautifully like crescent moons, and joked that this information was worth seven thousand gold, but he’d make a special exception for Kay.

“Alosha’s Flower. It’s a very rare treasure that’s picky to find.”

“And... what’s that?”

Alosha’s Flower? Kay had never heard of it. It seemed to be a plant. Maybe it was an herb? Zigryl smiled graciously at him like Kay was a curious child.

“It’s something that helps people get pregnant, though it does a little more than that.”

“What?”

Was it a sort of sexual enhancer, then? Or some nutritious herb for virgins who wished to get pregnant? A supplement for women wanting a child? Kay watched the man’s wicked smile with a puzzled look on his face. The grand duke wasn’t here just to acquire something like that, was he?

“Why are you looking at me like that? Don’t think this is like one of those cheap concoctions.”

Kay felt bewildered all the same, even if this was some high-quality drug. A person’s sex life was important, of course. Lust was one of the four human desires, and he’d heard about how painful it could be not to be able to engage in sex.

But he wasn’t sure it was worth sending fifty private soldiers, using seven thousand gold, and even coming all the way here in person. And judging from the previous night, he didn’t seem to need any drugs to enhance his performance in bed.

But if this really was about something of the sort, this man would drive the empire to ruin should he become emperor. Kay narrowed his eyes and avoided Zigryl’s. Zigryl laughed.

“I think my simple explanation has given rise to a misunderstanding. Alosha’s Flower doesn’t just increase a person’s chances of getting pregnant. Whoever takes it temporarily gains a real womb in their body. And it works on everyone, regardless of age or gender.”

“You mean men, the elderly, and even children could receive this effect?”

“*Of course,”* the man said confidently, and Kay stared at him for a moment, keeping his mouth shut. He wasn’t sure whether to believe him. The man had spouted lies just now with that brazen look of his. Kay believed this had to be another lie, but the indifferent look on Zigryl’s face suggested that maybe he was telling the truth.

“*You’re kidding... right?”* Kay said, laughing dryly. Zigryl had looked at him as if he were cute.

“I guess it must exist somewhere...”

And even if this flower was imaginary, he’d probably come here looking for something or other.

Kay grabbed his left wrist, the less swollen of the two, and adjusted his clothes. The bandage on his forehead was slightly bloodied since he’d banged his head against the wall earlier. Zigryl had pretended to be a gentleman and claimed he hated leaving scars, but obviously he’d been spouting drivel.

Kay gathered himself and got up, looking around him. He heard a small noise from below, but instead of heading down, he found himself an adequate room. He didn’t want to go down there and encounter Zigryl again. Both his mind and body were exhausted, and he didn’t feel like thinking about anything.

Walking slowly along, he chose one of the many chambers stretching along the corridor to either side of him. The air smelled musty, probably because there hadn’t been many guests for a long time. The sheets were covered with a layer of fine dust. He wasn’t a stickler for cleanliness, but he didn’t want to breathe dust in a windowless room. Still, since it was the grand duke who was visiting, surely they’d rushed to prepare a room or two somewhere.

Kay softly opened another door. As expected, the room at the far end had been cleaned. There was probably another room that had been readied for Zigryl. Kay knew full well that a tiny room like this couldn’t have been intended for the grand duke. He unbuckled his sword from his belt, put it down on the table, and sat down on the clean bed.

The surroundings were quiet. Perhaps because he’d just orgasmed, sleepiness came to him quickly. He lay down softly, enjoying the feel of the dry sheets. He was thinking that he’d like nothing better than to lie in this room until they left when something passed the door, which was ajar.

Kay watched silently, then blinked slowly. There was nothing but a wall in that direction. But the white things he’d just seen had been a person’s legs, for certain, and he hadn’t seen them come back. He closed his eyes. *Let’s pretend I didn’t see that just now. I must be seeing things again. I saw nothing*, he told himself repeatedly. His eyes, however, opened anyway.

“I... I must be out of my mind.”

Curiosity had killed the cat, and maybe it would kill him, too. Why did people always feel the urge to check at moments like this? Kay sat up sleepily and slowly picked up his sword again. As he crept out, he noticed that there was indeed just a flat wall right to the side, with no room for any person to stand. *What in the world?*

Kay looked around, then noticed a brick close to the floor that was slightly protruding. There was dust in the cracks except for the top of this particular brick. It was as if someone touched this one often.

“...”

Kay put down his sheath on the floor, then pulled out his sword, holding it upright. He carefully pushed the brick in with his foot.

* * *

“What are you doing over here? And why did you make that woman cry?”

Schumann said, glancing at Helena. Zigryl smiled pleasantly.

“I was removing a rival in love.”

“I’m... sorry?”

Zigryl flicked the hair off his sword indifferently, and Schumann frowned at him.

“Say that again?”

“I said, I was removing a rival in love,” Zigryl said kindly. He seemed to like saying it. Schumann gulped. Did this mean what he thought it meant?

“Do you... really love Kay?” Schumann said, a grave look in his eyes. Zigryl quietly burst out laughing, his purple eyes glowed viciously. Pushing aside the hair that had fallen down his comely face, he muttered easily, “Ha. Of course not.”

“Then... what is this? Why are you doing something so illogical? You’re scaring me.”

Zigryl had always been strange, but this was even worse. Zigryl narrowed his eyes like a fox for a moment, seemingly in thought. It was strange, to be certain, the way he responded to Kay. This had been true during sex, as well as when they’d encountered the zombies.

And it had happened again just now. He’d found it cute when he saw Kay and that small woman talking, but the moment they kissed, a rage had gripped him. Before he knew it, he’d grabbed Kay by the hair. He pulled himself together as soon as he saw Kay’s shock, but in truth, he’d been intending to bash Kay’s head in.

But the thing was, he only liked Kay a little better than the others. He didn’t care if it was love, but he believed he would grow sick of Kay one day as well. A little more enjoyment out of Kay, and he would grow tired of that coquettish body, the quiet moans, and the pleading tears. He’d never lusted after someone so much, but at this age, it wasn’t strange that he’d found himself that particular someone. And Kay wasn’t a bad first, what with his cool attitude and everything.

Zigryl considered Kay’s personality and snickered. He wasn’t sure what Kay thought of himself, but Kay was quite an indifferent person. That disinterest in others showed from time to time. He probably wouldn’t share personal details even with an old friend—though Zigryl couldn’t be sure of this.

Kay must hate Zigryl with a passion, and yet he would mostly give Zigryl looks that seemed to say, *I’ll be rid of him in a few days, anyway.* He talked this way, too. Given Kay’s personality, there would likely be no repercussions even if Zigryl was to keep him around for days—or perhaps even weeks, until satisfied. Not that repercussions were important to him, of course.

Schumann looked at Zigryl strangely, noticing him smile to himself, and Zigryl elaborated.

“Well, I’m far from done having fun with him yet. I can’t have him being in love with someone, can I?”

Schumann stared at his liege stupidly. *What the hell is he saying?* he seemed to be thinking.

“You mean you’ll be keeping him around for a while?”

“Yes.”

Kay would have blanched had he heard this. Maybe he would decide to kill himself again, for real this time. For Schumann, it was difficult to understand how “having fun” with someone could be different from dating them. He didn’t care, however, whether Zigryl fell in love or simply enjoyed a few days of carnal pleasure. He forced himself to nod and offered as a sort of consolation.

“Kay probably doesn’t love Lady Helena.”

“Of course not. But he still kissed her, that crude woman.”

He sounded somewhat offended. Schumann wasn’t sure why he was trying to monopolize the man, if he was just looking for a few weeks of entertainment. He wondered if he should tell Zigryl that there seemed to be a lot more emotion involved than simple enjoyment, but reminded himself who he was talking to. Zigryl wasn’t built for love.

Schumann walked toward the room where the baroness and her son were waiting and changed the subject. “Ahem. By the way, the House of Arel has made an absurd request.”

“A request?” Zigryl asked, sounding as if he was unfamiliar with the word. Schumann felt similarly, and he sounded very displeased.

“Yes. They have two Alosha’s Flower roots, and they’ll offer us one. In return, they want you and their daughter to eat the other.”

“Hmm?” Zigryl stopped and turned to Schumann, who nodded as if to say, *Yes, you heard me right.*

“So, what did you tell them?”

“Well... I was thinking of agreeing.”

“What? Schumann, I don’t like that woman,” Zigryl said, displeased. Schumann didn’t seem fazed.

“...I was thinking of agreeing, but when that woman showed me one of the flowers, I realized it had been dried the wrong way. It’s lost its potency.

It’s only useful if the ovary of the plant isn’t dried up.”

The baroness had brought the right flower, but it had effectively been rendered useless. Zigryl scowled.

“So the flower was useless, to boot.”

“Yes.”

They were now in front of the living room, where the baroness and her son were still waiting. Zigryl narrowed his eyes at the doorknob, as if trying to see through it. He asked Schumann, “I can’t kill them yet?”

“No. They were crafty enough to hide the location of the flowers.”

“They can still talk if they have no arms and legs.”

Zigryl sounded as though he genuinely believed this to be a good idea.

“Well, I suppose they can,” Schumann said.

“But we need their hospitality while we’re here, and they said they’d start searching the spots where the flowers might be found starting tomorrow morning. According to them, the flowers usually bloom at this time of year, and it won’t be hard to find more. I told them I liked their suggestion, so they’ll be in a rush to find them.”

Zigryl looked at him sharply.

“And if they do find them?”

Zigryl didn’t ever want to see Helena again. Schumann grinned. Apparently, keeping the promise had never been his intention.

“Well, the rest would be up to you after that. Kill or spare as you’d like. We can come up with any justification we need, and that’s all we’ll have to do.”

The moment Schumann finished speaking, there was a tumbling noise from the floor above, followed by a scream.

“Kay...?”

Schumann was about to tell him that it wasn’t Kay’s voice, but Zigryl had already drawn his sword and was running down the corridor. Schumann scowled, staring at his back.

“There really is something wrong with him...”

He scratched his head. “I wonder what it is this time?” he muttered, quickly following Zigryl.

* * *

The outline of a door appeared soundlessly in the wall when Kay pushed the brick in with his foot. He gulped and pushed softly, and a secret passageway—the sort said to exist in all castles and larger mansions—opened up. It was very dark and seemed to resemble a stairway to hell. Kay had a feeling he was probably venturing where he shouldn't.

"..."

Maybe I'll turn back after all. This looks dangerous, for some reason... His body, however, was already moving inside. He took a step forward, and a wooden stair creaked underfoot. Someone had gone ahead of him, that was for certain. But how had they gone down these squeaky steps without making any sound? Could it really have been something not quite human?

He stepped down the dark stairs with great care. Cold wind slowly enveloped his body. Perhaps he was far too plucky, and stupid to boot. He'd found nothing pleasant about this village from the moment he entered it. And yet here he was, inviting more trouble.

After he made his way down around ten of the steps of the spiral staircase, the light from the entrance no longer reached him. It was so dark, he wouldn't have noticed if the stairs suddenly ended in a sheer drop. He didn't think he could go further, but he probably wouldn't be able to sleep without finding out what was below, since he'd come all this way. He carefully proceeded, keeping his hands on the walls. The stairs continued onward.

I won't starve before I get to the bottom of these stairs, will I? He looked behind him, and there was nothing but darkness there as well. The only sound he could hear around him was the creaking of the wooden stairs. He was starting to sweat nervously when he noticed a faint light from below. Then a smell filled his nostrils, so sweet that he felt his nose might melt right off.

Something was rustling. There was someone there, that was for certain. Kay held his sword close to his chest and walked as quietly as he could. A little bit of noise would probably be drowned out by the rustling.

There was a small torch on the rough, cavern-like walls. It was so small that it only lit its immediate surroundings, but Kay welcomed it after all that darkness. When he reached the bottom, he felt something swish underfoot.

Flowers?

It seemed these flowers were the source of the sweet smell. Though it was hard to tell for certain in the dark, there were dark purple flowers spread about. There were only five or six of them, but the scent filled the air to the point of making him dizzy.

The air felt almost hazy as well. Kay narrowed his eyes, trying to locate the source of the noises. There was someone here in the darkness, sitting and staring right at Kay as if they'd been waiting for him to arrive.

Their eyes met. Suddenly, he felt a rush of fear—like he'd just entered Bluebeard's room. He'd snuck into someone else's secret passageway, only to be caught so quickly. He tensed immensely, wondering whether he should apologize. That was when the other person spoke.

"I'm sorry, but could you pick one of those flowers for me?"

Kay felt himself relax as soon as he heard the voice. It was much louder and ordinary than he'd imagined. It would have been nice to put a face to the voice, but the person was sitting in a spot that was too dark for him to see. Being an uninvited guest, Kay did as he was asked and picked a flower at his feet. The closed bud popped open as soon as he broke the stem, releasing a sweet smell into the air.

"Ah..."

Kay said, slightly taken aback. He'd never seen a flower bloom before. Amazed by the sight, Kay stared at the flower for a moment. The small flower, wrapped in two green leaves, had a bright red coloration. The words "blood red" could probably suit no flower better than this one.

It didn't so much look wicked, however, but rather adorable. It had a pretty shape, like a miniaturized version of a water lily, and a red stigma glowed like a gem. *Wait, is this that Alosha's Flower?*

The sight of the blooming flower seemed to take all the remaining tension out of his body. Lowering his weapon, Kay approached the other person. His eyes had adjusted to the darkness, and a change in angle allowed him to see the person's face. It was that boy from earlier, as he'd expected. The boy smiled slightly as he took the flower.

"Thank you."

"N-not at all."

Unlike when Kay had seen him at the top of the stairs, the boy had a smile full of vigor. He'd been afraid of the boy's pale face earlier, but now

he realized that the boy was actually quite handsome. Noticing Kay's scrutiny, he covered his mouth shyly and laughed.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"There's something so different about your expression. You look much better when you smile this way."

The boy's eyes rounded with surprise at Kay's sincerity, then he laughed pleasantly for a good while.

"Wow. Are you hitting on me?" he asked in a friendly tone, wiping tears from his eyes. Kay reddened. It was embarrassing to hear such a thing from a male—and not just a male, but a young boy at that. He'd probably said it because the boy had something of a feminine beauty in his features. The confused look on Kay's face seemed to have given him the answer he needed. The boy laughed playfully and muttered, "If you didn't do that on purpose, then you must be a natural at this." Kay didn't think he was particularly special, but he'd dated his fair share of women and didn't refute the statement.

Noticing that Kay was still standing, the boy suggested he sit down opposite the table. The seat was closer to a corner. He thought it might be better to move the table, so it was right below the torch, but he sat down instead of saying so. The shadow cast by a pillar made it hard to see the boy's face, even though he was right in front of Kay now. Why had he been sitting alone in the dark like this? Wasn't it unpleasant? Kay was starting to have such questions when the boy said cheerfully,

"I'm Sena. My name sounds like a girl's, doesn't it? I'm the fourth child of this family. Who are you?"

Kay did seem to remember being told Helena had a younger brother, though it had been so long ago that the memory was hazy.

"Kayle Logriel. Just call me Kay."

"Oh. Are you from Lablen, Kay?"

This was a cheerful, friendly little boy, completely different from his sister. Warming up to him, Kay smiled wryly and nodded.

"Well, yes. A wicked fox dragged me here..."

Why did it have to be him, among all the people of Lablen? He really had some terrible luck. He'd grown used to it, but the moment he answered Sena's question, the thought came back to him.

“A fox?” Sena asked. Repressing the memories of the last few damnable days of forced travel with Zigryl and his magician, Kay smiled.

“Grand Duke Rhyner’s nickname is the Fox. He and his secretary brought me here.”

Kay tried to make it sound as innocuous as possible, but it wasn’t easy.

“Oh, that grand duke... So he’s here as well?”

Though Kay couldn’t see very well, he had the feeling Sena’s eyes were glowing, and there was excitement in his voice. He could understand how amazing Zigryl, a hero of the battlefield, might seem to a boy Sena’s age. *But I doubt you could continue to think that after you’ve met him.*

Kay nodded with a bitter smile, thinking this was not a particularly good thing. Sena nodded along.

“So that’s why Mother told me to stay out of sight...” he said innocently, and Kay’s head shot up.

“The baroness told you to stay in here?”

Had the woman really told her son to stay in this dark, dank place? Noticing Kay’s open eyes, Sena shook his head.

“No. My mother told me to stay in my room. To stay out of sight. I’m never much help to my sister.”

Sena’s voice was cheerful, which seemed discordant with what he was saying. Kay looked up so that he could have a closer look at Sena’s face, but the boy’s expression was still hard to make out.

“Never... much help? Why is that?”

Kay asked, furrowing his brow. Sena laughed quietly. It suddenly bothered Kay that he could hear the laughter, but not see the boy’s face.

“My mother thinks I’m mentally ill.”

Kay nearly dropped his sword.

“Mentally ill?”

Sena’s snickering echoed slightly off the walls. Their surroundings were completely quiet otherwise, and Kay felt somewhat spooked.

“To tell you the truth, it’s my mother who is mental. She’s too vain, you see. If she’d allowed me to marry Belle...”

Belle? Sena suddenly stopped speaking after his puzzling comments. The silence stretched on for a little too long for him to be simply recalling something, and Kay made to get up, tilting his head.

“Sena? Why aren’t you—”

He inadvertently reached for Sena’s shoulder, but the touch was so cold he flinched and pulled back. It was cold and hard, like the zombies that he’d encountered a few days back.

“Kay...”

Sena’s voice was anxious and shaky. Kay began to wonder what look Sena had on his face. He couldn’t be smiling even now, could he?

“I wonder whose baby it was in Belle’s womb back then?”

“I’m sorry?” Kay said, frowning.

“Kay!” came Zigryl’s voice from upstairs at that moment. There was a noisy squeaking as someone descended the narrow wooden stairs, and soon Zigryl showed up.

“My lord?”

The man seemed out of place in this dreary space. Was the distress in his beautiful face an illusion caused by the dark? He had his nose covered, like he’d noticed a stench, and his brow was furrowed.

“What are you doing here?” Zigryl asked irritably, running his hand through his sweaty blond hair. A little frightened, Kay said,

“Well, I was having a short conversation with Sena here...”

Kay turned to Sena.

“This is the grand duke. Why don’t you introduce yourself?”

He heard a laugh. Sena did not budge but simply smiled, and Zigryl looked astounded.

“Have you lost your mind?”

“What? Oh, Sena, hurry now...”

Kay was about to whisper that the man needed to be accorded respect—who knew what he might do otherwise? But Zigryl grabbed him and shouted up the stairs.

“Schumann! Schumann? Get down here right now!”

“Yes, yes. I’m coming,” came a relaxed voice from above. Kay groaned softly since Zigryl had grabbed his swollen wrist, but Zigryl didn’t let go.

“Why are you doing this?” Kay asked irritably. Couldn’t he move about as he pleased? Zigryl looked confounded.

“Snap out of it, Kay. That’s a dead body.”

* * *

Schumann came down, buried barrier stones all around, and began a purification ritual. Kay trembled throughout, clinging to Zigryl's arm. Sena's laughter continued to echo in his ears.

He'd never wanted to touch Zigryl again, but the reality was, it wasn't so easy. Whenever his hatred for Zigryl increased, something happened to force him to stick to the man—though Kay's resentment always seemed to be reaching its maximum possible point. He was starting to wonder if his sheer hatred toward the duke was, in fact, the cause. He had to be mistaken, of course.

Zigryl was the worst when one had to face him alone, but he was one trustworthy ally. Finding his hand quite warm on the shoulder, Kay felt a little embarrassed of himself. Human nature could be so fickle.

"I thought you'd be resting. Why were you wandering about like some street cat?"

Zigryl said. Kay had nothing to say. *You have a point.* He had no idea why he'd come down here and had a friendly conversation with a corpse. He'd almost felt entranced. How many occult experiences had he had already? He'd never seen a ghost in his life, but in the last few days, his life had certainly gotten a splash of strange.

After Schumann was done with his purification ritual, the dry laughter that refused to end slowly faded away. The body of a boy, sitting with his neck in a noose attached to a cabinet, came into view. The body seemed recent since it wasn't badly decomposed yet. But the eyes were bulging and the tongue stretching out—far from the innocent, beautiful boy that Kay had seen earlier. Rubbing out the goosebumps on his arms, Kay muttered vacantly, "I... spoke to *that*?"

"Yes. You sounded very kind as you told it to greet me."

Zigryl seemed amused, but Kay was bewildered. It had felt too real this time. In fact, the current reality was what felt fake in comparison. Was the cold touch of the corpse's shoulder the only concrete reality?

Schumann studied the body, then spat as he dusted off his hands, "No wonder I had a bad feeling about this. Obellus were growing here."

"Obellus? These are obellus?" Zigryl asked, pointing to the plants which had died out after Schumann's ritual. Schumann nodded. *Obellus?* Kay had heard of them before. They were said to be the most dangerous and powerful hallucinogenic plant in existence, providing a kick of raw

pleasure. The experience had hardly been pleasurable, but nevertheless, Kay had plucked one and smiled at its beauty. Kay asked Schumann, who was scratching his head, “D-does that mean I’m addicted?”

An addiction to the flower ended in a miserable death. *It’s been less than an hour since I resolved to bear the next four days, but the first day is already proving to be a challenge...* Schumann looked Kay up and down.

“Well, you look fine now. I’ll wager you were under the influence briefly, but not addicted. A little longer, and you’d have been in some real danger. People who are addicted to obellus are, well... Let’s just say they aren’t hard to spot.”

Schumann smiled cheerfully. “You could say they become like His Highness here.”

“Purify him just in case, Schumann,” Zigryl said. Kay looked at the secretary. He’d wanted to ask for that very thing, but Schumann was not a generous man, so he’d kept his mouth shut. Schumann, however, glanced at Zigryl and nodded lightly. It was hard to tell what he was thinking.

“Well, all right. The air isn’t very clean here. Let’s go on up. We’ll heal you as well, while we’re at it.”

Kay’s eyes widened in surprise, but Schumann patted his back with a complicated expression, removed the torch from the wall, and started up the stairs.

* * *

After they’d been served dinner, Zigryl and Schumann finally seemed to recall the corpse they’d seen earlier. When they mentioned it, the entire House of Arel was turned upside down. After the body was identified, sadness filled the air. The boy—that is, the dead body—really was Sena, the fourth son of the family who’d gone missing ten days ago. It appeared that Kay had really talked with the dead. He began trembling even more, and Zigryl watched in amusement. He would occasionally ask questions like “Was the conversation entertaining?” or “What did you talk about? The afterlife?”, making sure that Kay couldn’t forget the experience.

“You... really are the worst,” Kay said, disgusted.

Pushing Zigryl’s hand away and walking forward, he checked Sena’s body again. The boy had obviously died via suicide. An old hemp cord had been hanging from a low cabinet, and the body had stiffened in a seated position, the neck hanging from the noose. The male servant and the third son were trying to straighten out the body now.

There were no other injuries. Though there were traces of self-harm on the wrists, the wounds were quite old and had healed to scars. The fact that the boy had died in a sitting position showed how determined he was to die. Most who tried to kill themselves struggled in their last moments, scratching at their neck with their nails as they regretted their decision. This death, then, was a very stubborn one.

The body, whose eyes had been closed and the tongue pushed down the throat, had a purple face. Kay recalled that the obellu had made him think the face was pale and cheerful instead.

The boy had been the fourth son of a baron. What reason had he had for killing himself? The scars on his wrists showed that it wasn’t his first time. Kay gazed at the baroness, who was standing with the help of her firstborn at a distance.

She was pale and anxious, looking more like a criminal whose deeds had been discovered, rather than a mourning parent. The plump third son, kneeling in front of Sena’s corpse, was crying tragic tears as he glowered in her direction. *Wait, don’t tell me...*

“Kay, go on up and ask him to purify you. The longer you delay it, the more reluctant he’ll get.”

Zigryl pulled Kay’s arm, whose eyes were casting a look of doubt at the baroness. He turned in surprise and noticed that Schumann was thinking hard, as though he’d suddenly realized that he’d have to waste more healing stones. The regret was written all over his face. In fact, the man looked ready to cry at the slightest provocation. *I should have known.* His behavior had been decidedly out of character.

“I... I don’t think I need it,” Kay said.

Schumann wasn’t exactly young, and even at his age, the idea of having to spend a bit of money was enough to have his eyes brimming with tears. Kay didn’t feel like burdening him. Schumann’s eyes widened as he turned to look at Kay, but Zigryl shook his head firmly.

“No. Kay, how can you be sure that what you’re seeing now is even real?”

“I... beg your pardon?” Kay said, tilting his head. Zigryl smiled in a slightly vile way. Schumann hung his head, the bitter look returning to his face. He seemed to agree with what Zigryl was saying, but Kay failed to understand.

“How do you know it’s actually me stroking your hair right now? You had an affectionate conversation with that corpse, after all.”

“...”

The ghost stories he’d been told as a kid rushed back to him. The idea was absurd, but he was unable to respond. Zigryl smiled softly at him.

“Just go on up. Will you only listen if you’re threatened?”

Kay smiled wryly and went up the stairs, Schumann tutting as he followed.

Kay entered the small room at the end of the corridor where he’d lain earlier. Schumann told him to put down his sword and lie down, while searching the bag at his waist. He produced some stones and a liquid solution. Sitting on the edge of the bed, Zigryl asked, “What was that scream earlier?”

Kay looked up at Zigryl.

“Scream? What scream?”

He blinked, unable to follow Zigryl's question. Schumann nodded, having applied the solution to his hands.

“Oh, yes. You heard a piercing scream from the third floor earlier and ran off to see what it was, Your Highness. I thought it was a murder,” he said with a smile. Kay looked downward, thinking the man had seemed very relaxed for all that.

“You heard a scream from the third floor?”

“Yes, it was a very desperate one. We were so shocked.”

Kay couldn’t agree that Zigryl had been shocked, but he frowned, unable to figure out what the scream had been. If it had come from the second floor, Kay should probably have heard it, too. But he’d been so deeply shocked the entire time, he’d heard nothing of it. *What scream?*

“Well, if you don’t know of it, then forget it. It wasn’t your scream, anyway.”

A scream from the third floor that hadn’t been Kay’s... There could have been no one on the third floor. Those who’d gathered earlier, after Sena’s body was discovered, had been the baron, his wife, the three siblings, and the two servants who’d stood in front of the room. There couldn’t be any thieves in the tiny village.

A mysterious scream that Zigryl and Schumann heard while Kay had been in danger almost seemed to suggest... Kay was about to think of something when Schumann placed a healing stone on his head.

“Now, don’t open your eyes until the ritual is over. You can talk, though.”

Schumann raised his hand to close Kay’s eyes, then sighed quietly.

“Yet another stone wasted...” the man muttered in a tormented voice. He sounded mournful, like he wanted to sew up his own lips for saying something so irresponsible.

Kay blushed, feeling apologetic for forcing him to use a stone. Zigryl was right—it was better to be safe than sorry—but it was embarrassing to be such an inconvenience all the time.

In hindsight, despite the coercion, he’d come along as a guide. It seemed, however, that he required their services more often than they needed his. Not only had he scarcely served as a guide, he’d barely fought, cooked, or even steered the coach. He’d proved the identity of the two men to the baron’s house, of course, but a document with the grand duke’s seal would have sufficed—Kay didn’t have to be here at all.

In complete honesty, he’d only been deadweight, getting hurt and even landing himself on the back of the grand duke. All this was enough to make Kay, who had always pulled his own weight, go so far as to look back and reflect on his life. He could tell why Zigryl had refused many guides in Lablen. The two of them could probably handle most dangerous and difficult journeys on their own. Having someone like him along would only hinder them.

“With all due respect...”

Keeping his eyes closed and feeling Schumann’s fingers tracing magical letters on his cheeks, he gulped and said, “Why did you bring me along? You two seem to be enough on your own, and I’m of no service to you at all... In fact, I only seem to keep getting in trouble.”

Kay heard Zigryl smirk, who was sitting at the head of the bed. A large, rough hand touched his forehead, and Kay shrank back a little, frowning. He hadn't been anticipating that, since he couldn't see.

Zigryl's hand, which had seemed likely to poke his eyes or something, moved over his forehead and nudged aside some hair. It was an affectionate gesture, quite unlike the person that the hand belonged to.

"Schumann, more than enough? How absurd. You seem to be saying whatever comes to mind because your eyes are closed, but I'm afraid Schumann is not sexy, beautiful, or cute in the least. You, on the other hand, are a sight for the sore eyes. Even if we don't have sex, you please my eyes and ears aplenty," Zigryl said.

"And how nice would it be if you please me between the legs, too?" he muttered indecently.

"That... that's the reason?"

Kay wasn't some clown or male prostitute. Had he joined them on this journey so he could satisfy Zigryl's carnal desires? Kay groaned, a hollow feeling filling him inside.

"What? You don't like your task? What seems to be the problem? It's a very honorable mission, you know."

Apparently honor was dead, then. Kay felt disgusted with himself for having attempted a conversation with this man and clammed up. He wanted to sleep, but he felt the hand move from his hair to his eyes.

"Kay? I asked if you don't like your task."

The lazy question was accompanied by movements over his eyes, like the fingers were about to poke them out any second. In fact, there was a little too much strength in the fingers for it to be comfortable. Kay found himself saying, "I... I like it. Yes."

He now felt as though his tongue and lips were no longer his own. He had to say things he didn't want.

"Is that right? I think that's a frown I see on your face."

"Haha... Of course not!"

What was more, he had to smile when he wanted to cry instead. Kay turned his head away, trying to focus on Schumann's chanting.

* * *

The healing magic made him ache all over, unlike the purification, and by the time everything was done, Kay was completely drained. Before he knew it, he was asleep. He seemed to remember hearing them telling him to rest well since they would have to go looking for the Alosha's Flowers themselves next morning.

Cold air whisked over his body, telling him the night had deepened. A bell tolled somewhere distant, indicating it was one in the morning. Was a window ajar? He felt cold even though he had sheets over him. He wanted to get up and close whichever window it was, but his body refused to cooperate.

Kay kept on telling himself he needed to close it when he heard the door creak open. It had to be the wind. The creaking continued for some time, and he felt something indescribable creep in through the opening. Kay felt his body tense suddenly. The same chill wind that he'd felt when he'd first set foot in Edor blew through the room.

He knew he had to run away, but his body felt like lead. A snickering, fluctuating in volume, came from under his feet. The fear was nearly pushing him to insanity. While he couldn't move so much as a finger, there was a strange spurting noise as something began crawling up onto the bed.

He felt a frigid chill, and the sheets covering him were slowly pulled down to the floor. His belly and arms were bared, and the fine hairs on the skin stood up. Cold sweat trickled down his temples like tears. Something cold and slimy touched his feet. A fog of black smoke billowed into his pant legs. The repulsive sensation made him hold his breath. The smoke was like a living organism, crawling over Kay's body.

Multiple voices laughed right in his ear, apparently mocking him. He couldn't breathe, since the black smoke was starting to choke him. His mind seemed to be about to fade. He flexed his stiff fingers instinctively, and at a certain moment, his eyes shot open.

"Eeeek!"

He could move his body, but his vision was clouded with darkness. It wasn't because it was night—the black smoke filled the entire room. A girl was standing in the darkness, gaunt and looking around fifteen. She had her hands over a bulging belly, and dark blood was flowing out from under her dress. The laughter was coming from her.

"Belle?"

Kay moaned. Why was he suddenly reminded of the name that Sena had mentioned? The girl stopped laughing and glowered at him, however, as if it was indeed her name. She looked ready to rush at him and tear out his throat.

He closed his eyes. He fumbled near his pillow and found the sword he'd left there. His fingers slid off the hilt multiple times because his hands were trembling and sweaty, but he managed to grip it with both hands. Gritting his teeth, he swung his weapon. Doing his best to keep his knees from bucking, he got off the bed and opened the door. The black smoke tried to grab him, and he ran for his life. Terrified moans escaped his lips.

This goddamn village. He was sick of it. He could feel the smoke grazing his back, as though it had barely missed him. It was probably mocking him, but whenever he felt the touch, all he could do was clamp his eyes shut harder and run. Why did such things happen to only him? Kay remembered what Schumann had told him. The man had told him to stay with Zigryl if he didn't want to see the hallucinations or feel the terror they inspired in him.

He nearly stumbled as he rounded a corner and came to a luxurious room with a double door. Kay did not have the wherewithal to consider that it was rude, or how dangerous the man in the room was. He gripped the doorknobs. What would he do if this wasn't Zigryl's room? Quivering, he glanced behind him and saw that the black cloud was right on his tail, coming around the corner.

"Zigryl!" he said, banging on the door with all the strength he could muster.

"Z-Zigryl Zigryl, Zigryl! My lord!"

He rattled the doorknobs. His entire body was damp and cold with sweat.

The moment the smoke seemed about to close in on him, the doors flew open.

"Kay?"

As soon as Zigryl appeared, the black haze that had loomed right behind him melted away like snow.

"Ha... haha..."

The frightful mass had vanished as soon as this fiendish man had appeared. Kay felt tears rise to his eyes. Zigryl, his hair a mess from having

just gotten out of bed, grabbed Kay as he collapsed.

“Kay? What’s the matter?”

“Zigryl... Zigryl...”

Zigryl felt a tug of emotion in his chest as Kay leaned into him, covered with cold sweat. He felt the urge to smile. *Haha, well, what do we have here? This could get dangerous real quick.* Kay was drenched as he fumbled for Zigryl’s hands, and it made his groin come alive. *What to do?* He narrowed his eyes, gazing down at the sweaty crown of Kay’s head, and asked in a casual voice.

“What is it, Kay? Had a bad dream?”

He placed his hands around the sweaty cheeks, and Kay looked up, completely ashen.

“I’m sorry, my lord. Strange things were in my room...”

“Ah.”

It must be the bad energy Schumann mentioned. He grinned and nodded, patting Kay’s shoulder like he was a crying infant. They stayed that way for a few minutes, and Kay’s tremors seemed to subside somewhat.

As his breathing slowed, his thinking faculties seemed to return, and his ears began to turn pink, presumably from embarrassment. Zigryl licked his chops, looking down at those blushing ears. Kay was a pitiful sight. Zigryl was starting to feel the urge to push Kay against the wall, shove his member between Kay’s pale, shapely buttocks, and screw him. Kay flinched, then slowly moved away. He’d noticed the beginnings of Zigryl’s erection.

“Well, now, to think you’d come running to me like a child because you saw a ghost!”

Zigryl, pretending to console him again, hugged him tightly. Kay tried to pull his waist backward to avoid contact with the hardening manhood if he could.

“U-uh, I’m sorry, I seem to have bothered you in your sleep...”

Zigryl smiled sweetly at him. The blood, which had begun to return to Kay’s face, was rushing back out again. He seemed to have finally realized that he’d jumped out of the frying pan and into the fire. Zigryl nodded, rubbing his chin.

“Yes, you did do me quite the discourtesy. It’s very late, and you came here with a sword drawn, too.”

Realizing that he was still holding his sword in one hand, Kay gasped. He stopped for a moment, his body in an awkward limbo, before dropping the weapon. The hilt was drenched with his sweat.

“Oh, no—this, this isn’t what you think... I-I was running away from something in my room...”

Kay stammered, and Zigryl narrowed his eyes as he looked down at Kay. Zigryl seemed to be considering what do to with him. He knew, of course, that Kay’s sword hadn’t been drawn with hostile intentions toward him. Kay hadn’t tried to kill him even when on his back. Why would he try it now, and after first waking him up with such a racket? Kay would know that if he wanted to kill Zigryl, he’d have to kill Schumann, too, and it would be difficult for him to get out of the Forest of the Dead by himself.

“Oh, I get it. You can stop explaining. Don’t take such coyness too far. Since you’re in my room now, all you have to focus on is your spunk.”

Zigryl spoke as though Kay had come in the night on purpose to see him. Kay felt cold sweat returning to his back, but he couldn’t turn back and leave again. He was too afraid of the dark cloud that would be waiting outside for him. Zigryl already had a pretty good understanding of the situation, and he wasn’t nice enough to simply offer protection to Kay for no cost. He was a despicable knave who wouldn’t let such an opportunity slide.

Giving another of his delightful smiles, he asked, “You came running here in a fright in the middle of the night. How did you know men often have a weak spot for such things?”

Zigryl knew that Kay hadn’t come here to seduce him, just as he knew that the intention wasn’t murder. But he took Kay’s shoulders and reveled in taunting at him, anyway.

“You’ve been acting like a virtuous nun, but now I see it—you’re a coquette.”

Kay deserved neither of those epithets. He’d been accused of being a ladies’ man and a skirt chaser before, but a coquette? *Impossible!*

“N-no, th-that’s not it,” Kay stammered. Zigryl smiled graciously at him and ran his hand down Kay’s cheek.

“Oh, don’t be shy. The embarrassment, the shame... I’ll help you forget it all. Come now, be brave and fall into my arms,” he said with a grin. Kay watched the predator in front of him with a wavering gaze. If he left the

room now, those strange things would crowd him again. Kay had run from a lion only to meet a tiger. It saddened him—especially the fact that he could escape neither. Zigryl looked oddly happy as he continued to jeer at Kay. Avoiding his gaze, Kay looked around the room.

It didn't seem suitable for a guest room at all. The room was gloomy throughout, with only a couple of small lanterns. The bed was decorated with purple mesh and lace that might have been popular before Kay was born, and the furniture flaunted varying colors. There had obviously been an attempt to make it expansive and fancy, but the result was a discordant mess.

Kay glanced at Zigryl. Even though there was something garish about this room, it was an oddly nice match for Zigryl, who had his tunic open to his chest. It felt like a special guest room in an old red-light district. Zigryl was giving off a subtle scent and an air of elegance, like the most expensive prostitute money could buy. *It's a cathouse with a tiger in it.* Kay's expression went rigid as he looked behind him. Zigryl sighed sweetly.

"Don't try to think your way out of this, Kay. You made a huge racket coming into my room at this late hour. You're not thinking of leaving with a goodnight and a bow, are you?"

Zigryl massaged Kay's neck and smiled coyly. Kay gulped. He wished he could do just that, but he knew that if he did, he would just come running right back.

Zigryl pulled him by the hand toward the bed, and as Kay was dragged along, he was conflicted between his desire to simply leave and a wish that he could simply pass out. When Zigryl laid him down on the bed and his hands grabbed Kay's clothes, he shut his eyes and said, "Zigryl, actually, I have something I need to tell you..."

Zigryl's eyes widened for a moment. Then he narrowed them again as he smiled.

"Now, now, there's an order to these things. Requests in bed are only supposed to be made *after* we do the deed, while you lie in my arms."

Zigryl ran his hand through Kay's hair as he pronounced the word "requests." If Kay really did whisper a request for him in bed, he would probably feel quite pleased, regardless of the intention. Be it riches or a title, if he said it and fell into Zigryl's arms, he would likely feel more than willing to grant it.

Zigryl was the sort of man who'd drawn his sword to cut out the tongue of anyone who presumed to voice a sweet request after the deed. But here he was, thinking he'd oblige before Kay had even told him what it was.

Why, this makes me seem like a man madly in love with some young concubine! Even as he felt amused by the thought, he enjoyed Kay's frown. Kay seemed somewhat resigned—maybe he'd already given up on trying to leave the room. Zigryl pictured dressing Kay in pretty clothes and decorating him with all sorts of expensive jewelries—though he knew Kay wasn't the sort to want such things—and it made him want to hum a tune.

But as he undid his tunic buttons and straddled Kay, he paled again. It was obvious he was already regretting his decision.

"Actually, that's not what this is... Earlier..."

Kay desperately grabbed Zigryl's hands, stopping him from undoing any more buttons, and said, "You see, earlier—not that a dead person's words are that trustworthy—Sena seemed to have been locked up on the baroness's orders."

"You say the claim isn't trustworthy, but you already seem to believe it."

His humming stopped, and his enjoyment did as well. Kay wasn't asking for something from him, but talking about another man—and a dead body at that. His good mood evaporated. Kay continued on, as if not at all interested in Zigryl's mood.

"Well, Sena told me that the baroness believed... Sena was a hindrance to Helena's future. She believed Sena was mentally ill."

"You mean that he would not have presented a favorable sight to a person like me?"

Zigryl said, perceptively getting to the heart of what Kay was trying to tell him.

"Yes. I don't know if you noticed, but the baroness looked more anxious than sad."

Zigryl nodded, slowly and smoothly taking Kay's hands while using his other hand to loosen Kay's buttons.

"The scream you mentioned in the evening is also somewhat odd. There was no one on the third floor, you see. And the way I was guided to find Sena's body—"

As the words tumbled out of his mouth, his doubts seemed to coalesce into a clearer picture. That was when Zigryl finished freeing Kay's final

button.

“So you mean to say that the scream was the boy’s, meant for us to hear? To have us discover his body and wrongful death, is that it? Is that what you really think, Kay?”

Kay hadn’t intended to jump to that kind of conclusion, but the portent of his words was such in the end. Zigryl laughed as if he found this a very cute idea and ran his hand gently down Kay’s cheek.

“But Kay, we only arrived here today. That boy—Sena or whatever his name was—looked to be at least three days dead. Nobody in this mansion could have predicted that we would arrive in Edor today. It must be true, then, the boy went missing ten days ago.”

“Well... Right... but you see...”

Zigryl was right. Kay still had his doubts, but Zigryl had pointed out the holes in his hypothesis with precision, and he had nothing to say to that. Such was the limit of an excuse hastily thrown together. This hurried attempt to escape his danger had only made his situation worse. Not only had this dangerous man completely opened his shirt without Kay realizing it, he was now even removing his pants. The threat in question caressed Kay’s cheeks and hair temptingly and grinned.

“Why don’t we put aside such boring talks and do something a little more fun?”

His hands began surreptitiously fumbling over Kay’s body, just like the night they’d first met, and Kay did his best to smile with his convulsing lips.

“I don’t... I don’t know what you mean, but I have a feeling I won’t find it very amusing. Can’t we... just not do it?”

Zigryl tilted his head.

“Why? Why don’t you like it?”

Zigryl seemed unable to understand why anyone would refuse. Kay exhaled heavily.

“It hurts... and it frightens me.”

Zigryl stared down at him quietly. Kay expected him to say something like, *So what?* and Zigryl intended to do just that. Zigryl opened his mouth to say, *What do I care if it hurts or scares you?* but strangely enough, the words refused to leave his mouth.

“My goodness, how absurd...” he muttered slowly, feeling Kay’s cheeks again. Kay looked up, incredibly anxious and wondering what Zigryl might say next. Zigryl simply smiled gracefully and slowly got off Kay, kissing him on the forehead. His tongue also grazed Kay’s forehead as he did so, seemingly disappointed, but that only lasted for a moment.

“Well, I suppose we have plenty of time,” he muttered enigmatically. Kay was slightly taken aback by Zigryl, who looked almost affectionate.

“I’m not sure I follow...”

Zigryl moistened his lips again, throwing his arms around Kay and rolling over to the middle of the bed. He hid a crafty smile.

“There’s that promise I made you before, so why don’t we just sleep in each other’s arms tonight like innocent maidens?”

Kay blinked slowly. *Innocent maidens?* He couldn’t believe the obscene, lustful Zigryl had just said such words. He wondered if he was so frightened that he’d passed out and was now dreaming. *I thought you’d forgotten about that promise long ago...* Zigryl gave a soft, knowing smile.

“What? You don’t like it? I can always sleep *with* you instead.”

Kay shook his head like a determined child and said, “No, I do like it.” This made Zigryl grin and lick his chops again.

“I can’t deny it’s disappointing, though...”

Thought so, Kay thought, but the man gave him a sensuous look.

“Just a kiss...”

Zigryl was already bending close and pushing his lips against Kay’s. Kay flinched at the sudden contact, but Zigryl grinned quietly and licked his lips. Was this really just a kiss? Kay wanted to push him away, but one of his arms was pinned down, and it was very difficult to refuse just a kiss when they were in bed together.

Zigryl’s tongue was traveling lewdly along Kay’s lips. Kay froze, but Zigryl sucked Kay’s lower lip repeatedly, as if to reassure him. This soothing gesture made Kay whimper softly and open his lips. He could feel laughter mixing with Zigryl’s breathing.

This wasn’t what Kay had been planning, but the kiss itself was quite pleasant. Zigryl seemed very skilled as their saliva mixed salaciously in gentle, intimate movements. There was a stickiness to the kiss that was different from the ones with Helena or other women. Kay recalled that when Zigryl had first jumped him, the kiss had been pleasant, at the very

least. Their tongues intertwined, and Kay sucked Zigryl's lips as well. Zigryl twisted his head and delved hard and deep, making Kay's face heat up. The ribald noises of slurping tongues filled the air. Their tongues mixed and their fluids spread everywhere for a good while.

"You know..." came a low, hoarse voice as they kissed. Kay could feel Zigryl's lips curling into a pleasant smile. "Your face says you don't want it, but you never refuse physical affection. Did you know that?"

Kay gulped down the saliva that had gathered in his mouth. *What?* The purple eyes were right in front of him, amused. His rough tongue was merry as it returned to Kay's lips.

That can't be right... He'd been unable to push Zigryl away, since he was the grand duke. It was the situation, not his own volition.

"You're not usually this defenseless, are you?" Zigryl said, closing his eyes, suckling Kay's lips, and feeling Kay's ears. Kay was reminded of the handjob in the corridor earlier and frowned. To be honest, Kay was just that sort of person—defenseless—but he couldn't bring himself to admit it. If he did, the man would probably compliment him and suggest he never stop.

But if he denied it, that would imply that he only let his guard down around Zigryl. That would make him sound like a young woman pretending to believe a man's promises that all they'd do was hold hands as he led her to an inn. At a complete loss as to what to say, he pulled back and averted his gaze. The bed was more than wide enough to allow this.

"I don't know what you mean..."

Zigryl moistened his lips once more, giving a relaxed laugh. *Maybe this is far enough.* Zigryl didn't want to push Kay too close to the edge. Kay was the first man Zigryl actually felt the urge to keep around, and he couldn't have the man running away from him. Zigryl reluctantly moved away from Kay's lips. Running his hand through Kay's hair and patting his cheek, Zigryl said, "Well, that doesn't matter. Go to sleep."

Feeling the numbness on his lips, Kay looked at Zigryl. He already had his eyes closed. The face with golden hair around it looked very innocent as the purple eyes closed. In fact, the shadow cast on his face by the moon outside the window even looked mystical. Kay blinked, staring at those quiet, closed eyes. He could feel with his belly that the man who was hugging him had a raging erection, but Zigryl didn't seem willing to open his eyes.

Have I not been purified fully yet? This can't be another hallucination, can it? Kay wondered, having been fooled and fooled again all day long. But the arm around his shoulder was very warm.

"If you keep staring at me like that, I'll assume you're in love with my face and jump you," Zigryl whispered. Kay immediately closed his eyes.

He had expected to toss and turn, but as he opened his eyes, he realized he must have slept like a brick. He'd gotten plenty of sleep recently, but his head had always ached when he woke up—perhaps because it was never quite comfortable, and his mind was never at ease. But this morning, he felt completely refreshed. It puzzled him that Kay felt this way after sleeping next to Zigryl, but it was true.

He'd been woken up by Schumann shouting, "My god, what is happening here?" Kay sat up, removing the mucus in his eyes. Zigryl was lying down, already fully awake and grinning at Kay. Kay turned to look at him, and Zigryl said,

"Slept well?"

His whispering was very embarrassing, but Kay simply told him, "Yes." Did this man really think of him as some young, innocent virgin?

"I truly cannot believe my eyes," Schumann said. He rubbed his eyes, wondering if he'd been poisoned by the obellus. Kay didn't know what was the matter with him, but Schumann looked genuinely puzzled. He cried out incredulously, "You slept with him, but nothing happened? Impossible!"

"..."

Kay was silent for a moment, then said, "Right. Astounding." What kind of man was Zigryl in his own secretary's head? But then again, even Kay himself had wondered if he'd be violated in his sleep. He'd slept far too well for all that, however.

He buttoned up his shirt, which had been opened the previous night. The sun was shining outside the windows, and cold morning air was seeping in through the gaps around them. The flimsy purple curtains were gaudy, but this morning was very peaceful, in contrast to last night. In fact, everything that had happened last night almost felt like a dream, except for Schumann's scowl.

"Your Highness, are you ill? No—you must have done the deed. So how is he so fine?"

Kay glanced at Schumann as he walked into the bathroom. Had the man never seen Zigryl's dick? If he'd caught sight of the massive size of the thing even once, he would know that no man could be safe after being penetrated by it. Zigryl told the man to shut up, so he quieted down. There was still a disbelieving look on his face, however.

"Why are you here so early?" Zigryl complained. Schumann pouted.

"What do you mean, early? We're in a hurry. We need to go back to the capital as soon as we find the flower—even if it's today. You know how much we've been delayed."

"I know. Don't grill me about it."

Schumann grumbled, saying, "How could I not?" Kay walked out with a toothbrush in his mouth and thought to himself that the two looked like an old married couple. Then he shook his head as it occurred to him that if they really were a couple, their children would have it very rough indeed. By simply choosing to raise children, these men would be committing child abuse.

(To be continued in Book 2)

OceanofPDF.com

The Flower of Alosha
Copyright© 2023 - Jang Ryang
Publisher - Mullebooks
E-mail - ask.mullebooks@gmail.com

All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

Translation - JS
Proofreader - Kang San
Cover artist - Babsot
Price- USD 5.99
ISBN 979-11-93753-03-3

OceanofPDF.com